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THE MARRYING OF SARAH GARLAND





The Marrying of Sarah Garland

BY

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AUTHOR OF

"A KING OF SHREDS AND PATCHES," "A MAN'S MIRROR," "TALLY," ETC.

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THE MARRYING OF SARAH GARLAND.

PROLOGUE.

JOHN BENNINGTON got up from his place beside Sarah Garland, took three wide strides and turned, smiling down upon her.

"Can you conceive how happy you have made me?" he said, and, apparently not expecting any reply, retraced the three steps, and bent over her, taking her hand and stooping to kiss it. "Just to call this my own for ever," he murmured, pressing her fingers.

She sat very still, making no sign, her eyes full of thought—introspective thought; as if having passed the seal of her word to a given action she now retraced the steps by which she had reached that finality. Perhaps there was a touch of questioning, too, in that inturned gaze, and to ask questions of one's self at twenty-one is possibly a less intricate process but infinitely more puzzling than decades later.

Bennington reseated himself, and laid his arm along the sofa behind her.

"You know, dearest, of course, that I have very little money—none, really. That comes of being the third son of an impecunious country gentleman. There's nothing worth mentioning for anybody except my eldest brother Fred, who, of course, succeeds to the estates. Bill, you know, had my mother's money—Bill's the one between me and Fred; and, well, what there's been to spare from the family funds has gone to the girls—four of them—and the old man thanked God when he'd got the last of them married. He talked at one time of selling some of the family pictures to set me up in a share in a bank, but Fred kicked up—anybody would have thought the precious daubs had been included in the entail; and my father always takes heaps of notice of everything Fred says, so it fell through, and my prospects, too. Not that I was particularly anxious for the dignity of a quill and a stool. But it's only fair to you, dearest, to let you know how things are with me."

She did not say anything when he paused.

"Though, I daresay," he went on, "that I have friends who would forestall me in the office, and paint me in the character of a fortune hunter to you."

"No," she said, turning her head towards him. The word was simple and so was the gesture, but not the intonation—it came out of that region of introspection whither she had retreated, and it conveyed rather a complexity of effects—a medley of traces—resentment for such as were supposed to have spoken ill of him, and chagrin for herself that he should permit himself to think she took counsel among that order of acquaintance. After a hesitating pause, she

added, "I have never asked nor permitted anyone to express to me any opinion concerning you."

His face lighted up, and he took her hand again. "Now, that's delightfully good of you. Of course I ought to have known—but, you know the saying, 'Give a dog a bad name and you may as well hang him.' I have my enemies, naturally—who hasn't?"

"Why should you have enemies?" There was a touch of quaintness in a certain formal way she had of speaking, but the directness of her question rather concealed the hint of it.

"As I said, 'who hasn't enemies?'" he answered.

"I don't see the necessity at all," she returned.

"Of course you don't, my dear. There are no enemies for you at Brux House or from end to end of Red Barn village, but," and here he paused to smile very sweetly into her eyes, "out in the big world—well, there's a line somewhere—Shakespeare, I suppose, as usual—about none being so fair but calumny shall find them."

She looked at him out of clear-shining eyes.

"Do you not like the country better than 'the big world?'"

"Yes, dearest, here and now, and when I shall be sharing life with you. But it is a different matter to kick round on the family estate as a sort of loafer, with your pious big brother grubbing about, looking after the proper management of every blade of grass, and scowling at you as a cumberer of the ground simply because you haven't been born in his shoes—and pray where would he have been if I had? Not but what *you*, dearest, would like a little house in town to taste the gaieties now and again—eh?"

"Is not a house in town a very great expense?"

"And are you not a very rich woman?"

"Aunt Julia never had a house in town."

"Pardon me, dearest, the late Miss Julia Beechwood can hardly be compared with a young lady of her niece's age—it's May and December."

"We're not in the least dull, here," she said, after a slight pause. "We have our gaieties."

He laughed pleasantly. "Dearest, we shall be as happy as the day is long."

"I shall write to Jim to-night," she said.

"And I will go and see him to-morrow," he returned. "Is there anyone else I ought to consult?"

"No. I was twenty-one a month ago, and after that Aunt Julia left me entirely free save for Jim—which is quite the same thing. I should never think of doing what Jim disapproved."

His face clouded a little. "Are you in earnest, dearest?" he asked, after a moment's silence.

"Certainly," she replied, looking at him with slight wonder in her eyes.

He sighed and leaned back.

* * * * *

It was three weeks later that Jim Garland telegraphed from town that he would be at Brux House in time for dinner—with important news. When he arrived he looked his sister over critically.

"Is anything wrong?" she asked.

He did not reply readily. During the past weeks he had been in a state of torturing indecision about this betrothal of Sarah to John Bennington. He felt himself too much an outsider in such matters to presume to own an opinion; he was merely alert for enlightenment upon an obscure subject.

"It's about Bennington," he said, diffidently.

"Is he ill?" she enquired.

"No—he has been arrested."

"Arrested!—by whom?"

"By the law, of course."

"For what reason?"

"Oh—some shady money transactions—got some wealthy young fool to back bills for him, and now—but you don't know what it means, I expect."

"Won't you explain, then?"

It was some small relief to spend a few minutes instructing her on the technicalities of the case.

She paled a little. "I knew he hadn't much money," she said, "but—I can't realise this."

"It's a knock for everybody," he answered.

"How will it end?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders and looked away from her. "God knows."

It ended in John Bennington being duly committed to take his trial at the forthcoming assizes, bail being refused. And at the assizes two counts were brought against him, but one of them fell through on some technical flaw in the indictment; on the other charge he was sentenced to five years' penal servitude.



CHAPTER I.

THE road, like the pilgrim's path to glory, wound uphill all the way. At frequent intervals the driver descended and plodded beside the horse, and the two seemed yoke-fellows well accustomed to each other's paces. Once, half way up a slope, a mishap occurred in the harness; the man regarded it thoughtfully for a moment, seeking in his pockets in the meanwhile; but apparently the necessary string for temporary repair was not forthcoming, for he stooped and unlaced his boot, divided the slight leathern thong into two with his knife, mended the broken strap with one half and refastened his shoe with the other. His passenger smiled as she watched the proceeding. At an earlier stage of the journey she had suggested dismounting too, when the ascents became stiff, but the proposal had been greeted with such decided negative, she had not repeated it.

"Naw, naw, indeed," he had said, waving a hand that seemed a carven shape, rather than a supple limb.

She also made attempts at conversation, but found the undertaking bristled with difficulties.

"How many miles is it from the station?"

He slanted an ear in her direction, probably his best one.

"Eh—h—h—h?"

"How many miles from the station to Blaenafon?"

He smiled; she coloured; it was clearly a matter of pronunciation—which she might have resented, but did not; there was the saving grace of humour in his smile.

"To Blaenafon?—from the station?" he repeated.

Then she smiled, hearing how the word should be articulated.

"Yes—Blaenafon," she said, struggling to be imitative.

His smile widened to a grin—but it was appreciative, not derisive. "Eight miles," said he.

"How long shall we be getting there?"

"Eh—h—h—h?"

She put the question again, divining from his eyes that the long-drawn query was something of a ruse to gain time to shape a reply.

"How many hours?" he asked. "Well—two."

"So long?"

He shook his head, his eyes unresponsive, seeming to intimate that the question conveyed no precise meaning to him.

They trailed slowly up a long incline. On either side of the road stretched wide patches of moorland country, still the neutral bleached grey of winter, though May was at hand, and the clumps of gorse were bursting into golden colour. Far away the whitewashed front of a dwelling gleamed in the softly blue atmosphere, and from its basket chimney rolled a curled column of bluer peat smoke, the deeper tint defined in an ever shifting line upon the paler background. Above the protecting bulk of a cluster of larches the smoke spread in a haze and was

wafted abroad, carrying its delicately pungent perfume over the silent wastes. It reached the road, and touched the nostrils of the travellers.

"Is that peat smoke?" she asked quickly, inhaling the faint odour.

"Eh—h—h—h?"

"Is it peat smoke? It must be coming from that chimney yonder."

"Aw—yas. Smoak from the turf—you like it?" He smiled.

"Yes."

He continued his smile and regarded her appreciatively. "You like the Welsh country?"

"I hope to do so."

He drew his eyes together a little, weighing her enthusiasm in the balance of a puzzled judgment, then stared ahead, and flicked the horse absent-mindedly.

At wide intervals they passed a solitary pedestrian, and greetings were exchanged—"How are you to-day?" "Very well." But the eyes of these mountain folk were searching the face of the stranger, as the familiar words slipped mechanically over their lips, scrutinizing with subtle absorbed directness, lacking boldness, yet possessing criticism.

Lapwings rose from among the tufts of bleached rushes, uttering their piercing desolate cry, winging overhead with flash of white and glisten of black, wheeling, swooping low, then lifting slowly as with difficulty, gestures hesitating. Where the pasture had passed the first stage from grey to green very tiny, very snowy lambs dotted the fields; on the slopes long-tailed ponies browsed, and raised big serious eyes to scan the passing vehicle; lean-flanked

cattle also fed among the rushes, nosing deep into the rank growth in search of the short shoots of green which only their instinct knew where to find. New horizons opened out continually—a fresh ridge of hills or a reshaping of contours from another point of view; but far eastwards one backbone dominated the rest in every direction, rolling southwards in great curves and monster dimples, but northwards rugged, with giant serrations, cragged peaks, precipitous chasms. Broken sunlight played upon them, casting purple shadows or suffusing a patch with rose tints.

"Those are the Berwyns, are they not?"

The man started—the silence had been long. Then he looked towards her. "The big mountains? The Ber—r—r—rwyns."

"Do you see them from Blaenafon?"

"The big mountains?—aw, yas."

The landscape grew wilder, but it was picturesque desolation; Nature in stern mood, beauty on the grand scale, with none of the mere prettinesses of green dells and flowered fields. It was a map in subdued tints—bleached hillsides, grey meadow flats with tufts of rushes in tarnished gold; wandering sunlight washed clear pallor into the aureole about headlands, and the clumps of gorse bloom girdled brows as diadems. Far away on the eastern ridge a veil drew gently along, dragging a ragged edge where a shower fell; and the sunlight ran after it, revealing its work in flash and sparkle on shining roofs and whitewashed gable ends. Descending a quick slope to a brown trout stream bright faces of primroses gleamed from the bank, and there was a huddle of half-a-dozen houses, and the thick reek of the peat

floated outwards from the saturated interiors—a little stifling, yet a haunting odour, never to be forgotten. Then upwards again and the cooler air swam about the face as rills of water, stinging after the caress of the warmer stratum below. Big spots of rain fell through the sun beams, silvered shafts piercing with javelin points the unresisting earth. The variety became monotony, repeating itself endlessly—ridge on ridge of hills, purple hollows, rose-flushed crests, towering peaks shrouded in the gauze of a passing flurry of rain; whitewashed homesteads far apart; here and there a toiling team and plodding ploughman, or one riding on the harrow to steady its course over the uneven ground. Lapwings cried incessantly, and sea gulls sailed above the fields uttering their threat of coming storm.

* * * * *

Blaenafon is a hill parish whose outlying stretches of bog are the cradle of the Aeron. It consists of less than a hundred holdings, comprising some five hundred souls, spread over an area made up of two by three and a half miles.

Each house stands in its own isolation, built of the grey stone of the district and whitewashed. When a dwelling is high poised in the wind's eye a leaning tower of stunted firs stoops over with its back to the weather quarter. But more frequently the buildings are tucked away most cunningly in notches and folds of the hills, and only the soaring peat smoke touches the area of storm. The old roof—thatched with rushes cut from the bog—is fast disappearing, its ripe weather browns and golds displaced by the monotonous drab of slates; the mountaineer, grown sordid, sacrifices the beautiful to the useful.

Henry Ackworth passed down the vicarage path, and through the gateway to the road. After a moment's hesitation he turned his face to the north-west and walked at a moderate pace. The sun was slipping to the western horizon, a ridge of hills spiked at intervals with stunted trees outlined at this moment to gaunt definition by the glamour of sunset light. Eastward the girdling mountains, half-a-dozen miles away, shut out the world of affairs from these valleys and uplands where life still flowed in the old simple ways. The summits were flushed in deep rose tints, the rifts and hollows in shadow. Where a great gash clove the mountain from headland to plain, the big brows gleamed iridescent, the precipitous sides stained with softer glory. Rolling, dipping, rising, falling, the land spread in a phantasy of shapes from the rounded foothills, starred with gorse patches, to the bald, starved crowns whence dimpled away the endless miles of barren mountain.

Ackworth halted, half turning, surveying the familiar scene. Where the faces of the cwm fronted each other—one rounded, the other furrowed, with crag ridges fretting its temples, the light changed momently, the rose merging into deeper tones with gold interpenetrating, the dusk running to the purple of damson bloom. On the southern promontory a face was hewn, with statuesque Juno brow and bold lines moulding the features. Ackworth had seen it on spring mornings lightly wreathed in silver vapour, in summer aflame at sunrise, stark grey in autumn dawns, when no alluring of the chilled earth succeeds in calling the sun from cloud-ambush; and again in snow-time with a pure mask defining each chaste curve and contour. The light slipped as a garment

withdrawn from limbs, touching the valleys with the first mystery of night.

Ackworth walked on. The western sky was a sea of fire, molten gold churned by the racing winds to myriad protean forms, while in the zenith hung storm flags in sable tints. Over the crest of a slope in mid-distance a vehicle hove gently into view, and the glow from the west suffused it and made its occupants momentary denizens of sunset land. Ackworth watched it with charmed eyes until it was swallowed by the engulfing walls.

It was five minutes later that he came to a parting of the ways and met the vehicle turning the corner. He knew the driver—the local carrier—but the lady beside him was a stranger. Greetings passed between the men; the lady glanced with the reserve of the newly arrived. Ackworth removed his hat, and the horse, coming to an easy incline, sped clumsily past him.

* * * * *

Miss Enid Mary Vaughan crossed the lamplit room to the window, and gazed abstractedly towards a belt of shrubs bounding the garden on the edge of the road. A figure emerged at length from the dusk of the laurels and came over the grass. She leaned out of the casement.

"So glad you've come, Henry. You're wanted. This is a pickle of a place."

"What is it?"

"Don't ask. There's a crone in the kitchen babbling—Doric, I suppose. I'm going to sketch her before I go to sleep—before the impression fades."

"Something the matter?"

"Somebody ill—or most likely dead, I believe,

from enquiries I made of Jane Ann. I understand a doctor is quite the last resource here—never a first aid, and death frequently intervenes and saves his labour. I daresay you're wanted to suggest a suitable cause of decease to put on the death certificate, or else to make a will for the proper disposal of six teaspoons, a three-legged table, and a cow."

"Do you know where the messenger comes from?"

"Bwlch—something, up on the top. I said you couldn't possibly go so far to-night; so the old woman stayed to see you."

Ackworth moved away.

Enid Mary leaned farther from the window to call after him.

"Don't be long, Henry."

He disappeared round the curving path; Enid Mary turned her face to the room.

"Mother."

A lady, seated so that the radiance from the lamp fell upon her book, looked up. "Yes."

"Jane Ann says the new neighbour has arrived."

"Oh."

"Shall we call to-morrow?"

"Rather too soon, my dear. People don't wan't to be bothered with callers the first day in a new place; she will be tired after her journey."

"H'm! I expect she'll only be too glad to be bothered with anything or anybody as soon as she sees where she has bestowed herself."

Mrs. Vaughan laughed slightly. "She may differ with you on that point, you know."

"She can't—unless she's a perfect heathen."

"Oh, well, some of us are heathens," laughed Mrs. Vaughan again.



Enid Mary shrugged her shoulders. "I hope she's young," she said, in an amiably querulous way.

"What will you do if she's middle-aged?"

The girl lifted her shoulders the least bit again, and twisted her lips a little. "Fancy coming to such a place—if you are not obliged."

"Miss Garland may be romantic," suggested her mother.

"But you can't support life on being romantic, mother."

Enid Mary settled herself in the corner of the sofa, took up a magazine and turned over the leaves. "I wonder how much longer Henry is going to be," she said after a silence.

Her mother glanced up again. "He may be going to the house."

Enid Mary sprang up. "He'll hardly be so silly, surely," she exclaimed, crossing to the door and peering into the hall.

She saw the servant reaching a heavy driving-coat from its peg.

She hastened out. "What is that for, Jane Ann?"

"Master is going to drive to Bwlch Gwyn," answered the maid.

"With that old woman?"

"Yes, miss."

Enid Mary closed her lips and followed the servant to the kitchen. She passed through and found Henry assisting the boy to put the pony in the shafts.

"Henry," she said, "this is too bad." Her tones were injured.

"Ask my aunt to excuse me, please, Enid," he returned, in a preoccupied way.

She turned abruptly, walking quickly, her dress

dragging a little flurry of stones over the loose gravel of the path. She did not halt until she came to a small gate that looked to the road, a side entrance to the garden. Here she placed her hands on the spiked railings and stood very still.

In a few minutes the sound of wheels and the sharp trotting of the pony were heard. She did not move, but as the pony-cart whirled past she cried, "Good-night, Henry." Her tones were slightly jeering.

He seemed not to hear her, for she heard no reply. The animal was fresh, and eager to go, and required careful handling. She leaned over to watch the vehicle disappear in the thickening dusk, pressing against the wooden palings until the spikes hurt her.



CHAPTER II.

THE pony trotted briskly along. Cold draughts of night wind swept downwards from the hills, meeting the travellers, so that they bowed heads before it.

"Pull your shawl closely round you, Mali; it is a chill evening for you to be out," said Ackworth.

The old woman sat motionless.

They climbed a rough slope, and the pony found all his exertions required for steady pulling and none to spare for frolicsome curvetting. Where had been the splendour of sunset two hours earlier there was now broken wreckage of cloud, piled high against the background of pale sky mildly radiant under the beams of a five days' moon. Ackworth leaned forward to relieve the strain upon the shafts, but his companion sat like a log. On either hand stretched broken bog land, bristling with rushes, the dried battalions that had weathered the winter withering and storms—golden in the morning sunlight, but now like a fuzzy unkempt beard on a rugged face. Shadows showed faintly at intervals, and soft rustlings were heard as the feeding ponies stirred fore-leg and hind-leg in the onward track of their browsing; once one lifted its head and whinnied plaintively, and once there was a stampede, the dull thuddings of their unshod feet running through the air as a muffled boom.

At wide intervals and far away faint lights winked, the slender home-made candle shedding its frail beam upon the blackness; also at intervals the vehicle cut through strata of peat smoke where the wind winged a streamer abroad.

Ackworth was listening to the low piping of the breeze in the rushes, as it threaded a way as fingers among strings. He had the fancy that the traditional airs of the country were much more ancient than the folk dreamed—coming from the days when the harper sat among the reeds and copied nature's music upon his instrument. No music wrought in the studio, by brain and ear, ever approaches the intimate soul-thrilling cadences of the melodies that have been handed down from generation to generation, played and sung by hearth-fires in the winter evenings, or raised in weird strains in the harvest-field as the women bend over the binding of sheaves and the men wipe heated foreheads and rest on the bank.

The old woman's voice suddenly broke in upon his reverie.

"Vicar."

He turned towards her.

"If he die will he go to heaven?"

A moment's hesitation, and then the reply. "We will pray to God that He receive him in His Paradise." The darkness hid the rush of blood that ran to his face.

"I pray all the time," said Mali, "when I go to the field, and to the spring, to carry in the turves, and making the bread—all the time: 'Oh, Great Lord, take him to Thy bosom.' But he has been a sinner."

Again the instant's hesitancy and the reply. "We all sin, and need forgiveness."

"He was so strong, such limbs, like the branches of a tree, and his movements like the wind—how could he be as the little men are, six feet and a half in his bare feet, striking his head against the lintel if he do not stoop near to his knees, and breath in his body like the mountain wind; he must needs want to roam with his gun, and fish in the lakes like the giants, he could not be cooped up in the church crying for his sins when the sun and the wind called his big soul. Aye, 'twas a proud thing to be his mother. And now he is to be taken from me—the staff of my age!" She ended on a wailing note.

Ackworth drew the slackened reins taut again—they had reached the top of the slope, and now for a short distance the ground was with them; the pony trotted briskly onward, the vehicle rolling as it surmounted and dipped among the inequalities of the road. Again the words hung in Ackworth's throat, the words he should, by reason of his office, patter glibly enough. After a few moments he decided to struggle with conventional phraseology no longer and launched into further enquiries about the accident.

"How long had Dafydd had the horse?"

"But three days—he bought it at Dalas fair."

"Three years old, you say?"

"Three."

"And no one been on its back before?"

"None. But he could manage the fiercest horse that was ever foaled."

"It was a risk, though. No saddle, you say—tremendous risk."

"'Twas but to take it to water, and the young dog bit its heel in sport."

"H'm!"

The quicker rolling of the wheels and the clean sharp tapping of the pony's hoofs filled their ears with a volume of sound, and brisker movement fanned the wind more strongly into their faces.

Mali extricated her hand from the folds of her shawl, and Ackworth started as he felt the lean claw-like clutch of it upon his knee.

"Vicar, pray for Dafydd." She held him in grip, waiting. "God will hear and answer your prayers; you are His servant.

There was an instant of pause, and the pony's hoof-beats seemed to Ackworth to be treading an endless measure of time; he was as one intoxicated—the night and the scene, the old woman's hard fingers on his knee, and her dying son in that picturesque hovel in the midst of the moor, made a phantasmagoria of lurid effect. He saw it through that medium of his blood that was Celtic; the swift emotion lifted him far and away from the cause of it—the dying man in the hut, and the old peasant woman at his side wrought in him the quick sympathy that touches causal things. He reached with his free hand and touched the fingers on his knee—"Poor soul! Poor soul!"

The old woman began to weep, and to rock herself, guttural sobs shaking her.

Ackworth steered the pony into a by-track, moving slowly, the animal treading with inborn caution; the cart jolted and lurched.

The carriage lamps irradiated a small area of short mountain turf, and some sheep fled in panic.

Again came the pungent smell of peat smoke, but denser, showing they were near a dwelling; then an opening door a little ahead, and the dim ruddiness of a poorly-lighted interior.

Having accommodated the pony in a rough shed at hand Ackworth entered the house. Fresh from the outer air, his nostrils sensitive and tingling with the pure draughts, the atmosphere met him with overpowering nauseousness—a commingling of every stale odour, held in solution, as it were, by the dominating turf smoke. The bed occupied a sort of alcove on the far side of the open hearth, and Ackworth went up to it, and stooped to get sight of the sick man.

"Dafydd, *bach*, the vicar is come," cried the old woman, in patient, woe-stricken accents.

It was an ancient box bed with smoke-stained curtains to close its one open side; the curtains brushed Ackworth's coat, and fanned faint, close fumes about him—the stored aroma of much smoke and many years' household exhalations.

"Dafydd," he said, in low tones, and the mother sank on her knees at the bedside, weeping again bitterly.

The sick man opened his eyes, gazed vacantly a moment and closed them again. His tousled head of jet black hair, and his ragged beard threw into ghastly relief the extreme pallor of his face; his massive hand on the blanket was grimed deeply with years' accumulations. Ackworth sat down in a low chair, and folded his arms, letting his chin sink to his breast. The silence was only broken by the mother's sobbing.

Ackworth stared hard at her quivering figure, his

pulse beats still quickened by that rush of unsubsided emotion. She was the central figure in one of Nature's dramas where the setting was pain—she, and not the stricken form stretched upon the bed. It was always so—the living claimed both attention and sympathy, the dying were too far removed, they were bound upon a journey that he shrank from prying into too closely. He, parish priest, guardian of souls, appearing in the eyes of these rude peasantry as a sort of acolyte in the adytum, one permitted to approach the very door of the sanctuary, stood aloof when a traveller set forth on the lonesome voyage; he who should have been pilot, was but spectator, an interested spectator, 'tis true, but ever shrinking from undertaking the more responsible rôle. He sat, imposing upon himself a certain self scrutiny, hearing Mali's hard sobs.

The interior was hushed and warm. On the settle sat the daughter, a lean, brown woman, holding in her arms a sleeping child, she and infant bundled in a thick shawl. Tears had trickled a tortuous course down her cheeks, and her dark eyes were weary. Her presence divided the scene into the pageant of motherhood—its two phases, the beginning and the ending. At intervals she crooned in low tones as the slumbering babe stirred, the elder woman sobbed. Ackworth fell into a reverie on the strange, alluring magic of motherhood that led the woman of all generations to seek suffering so acute and so varied—always suffering for the child. Mali, poor untutored soul!—deaf to the call of pain in her neighbour, grim spectator of the tragedies of passing life, was now shaken to the core and centre of being at the prospect of losing a worthless fraction

of humanity—an idle, loafing fellow, too lazy to earn the bread he ate, sitting at his mother's table, a man of forty years, eating the food she worked to obtain.

Unexpectedly the old woman's voice broke into words, scarce articulate through the choking in her throat.

"Great Lord! Thou wast once a babe in a mother's arms—have mercy upon all mothers!"

Ackworth started, thrilled with fresh emotion. He slipped to his knees beside her. She had given him the key-note of the scene, and he began to pray, fervently, with the tender pathos of words that he knew would thrill the poor creature's heart, crying for pity on a mother's woes, picturing her fleeting joys, weaving in fancy the soft halo of sanctity about her brow.

Mali's sobs subsided. Perfect silence reigned when he paused. The woman on the settle wept without a sound, and hugged her infant closely. Mali did not stir. She was in a dim reverie of peace; she was lost in the divinity of her motherhood.

She got to her feet haltingly at length. Her face was calm. She leaned towards her son and pushed back the tangled hair from his forehead, revealing a paler shade of skin high on the brow.

"Dafydd, *bach*," she murmured.

But he was past human things, and gave no returning sign. She sat on the bed gazing upon him, but dry-eyed, with a certain grim serenity, as if his safe passage to another shore was now assured.

A queer tumult of feeling made Ackworth cynical towards himself. The glamour of his words had cast peace upon the scene, the shallowness of their sub-

stance with regard to the needs of the voyager his hearers had not gauged. In the strangely simple range of their emotions the adroitness of touching upon the dominant one in its abstract phase had completely blinded them for the time being. Mali had forgotten that she had craved the vicar's appeal at the mercy-seat of God for a wayward son. Ackworth stooped over the dying man to catch the feeble play of his breathing.

"His soul will pass at the dawn," said Mali, quietly, folding her hands in fresh pose. "I am giving him back to the Lord. God gave him to me as a helpless babe. I have reared him to manhood —and now I give him back to God."

The sky above Cwm Berwyn was roseate, the silver wash of the dawn was flushed in delicate shades, ranging from an orange depth on the horizon's rim to palest flame where the morning blue dipped to meet and merge in it. Mali's Dafydd had yielded up his soul an hour before; and Henry Ackworth was returning homewards, jogging slowly, descending the road they had plodded up the evening before. There were night mists floating in patches about the valleys, hooding nooks and folds and screening them from prying scrutiny; trails swept up the slopes, eddying hither and thither, spreading, dispersing. Hillocks had coronals encircling their bald crowns, the far mountains were hazy, still touched with the mystery of night.

Ackworth held the reins loosely, and stared at the momently changing panorama of the sunrise as he had watched the sunset of the previous evening, knowing each phase by heart, seeing the orange glow

into gold, the rosy tints deepen to crimson, against a background of translucent green. And after a time into the line of his vision a white figure merged; he was not sure whether it had been there all the while he had gazed in that particular direction, and he but that moment become aware of it. It was poised in mid-air as it seemed to him; really, it was standing on a cob of rock projecting above the level of the surrounding ruggedness. A little breeze swept its light draperies hither and thither. He was nearing the house of Cae'rmynydd. The figure was slim, and faced the sunrise.

The pony, untouched by the waking splendours of another day, and possibly drowsy from long standing in the close mountain shed, ambled lazily onward, the vehicle making the least possible noise as it rolled slowly along. Shortly it was passing beneath the high-placed rock on which the solitary figure stood, and the sound of the wheels caught the lady's ear. She turned sharply and looked down. It was she whom Ackworth had seen driving with the carrier. With prompt country courtesy he lifted his hat, and the pony with equal promptitude drew up. Ackworth never knew whether he had touched the rein or if the animal's sagacity chose that special instant to exercise personal discretion.

Much surprised, slightly embarrassed, the lady acknowledged his greeting briefly; she had evidently thought she had the pageant of the sunrise to herself.

"Miss Garland, I believe," said Ackworth, not without abashment.

"Yes."

She was wearing a thick wrap of white wool about her shoulders, from under which came the folds of a

morning gown; her loosely coiled hair made picturesque disorder about her head.

"I am the vicar here," he said. "I have been up on the mountain all night with a dying person."

She bowed.

Both glanced at the glowing east, where the dazzling glamour increased momently, telling that the instant was at hand when his majesty the sun would show the brilliant tip of his fiery crown. She gazed in abstraction; and he watched until the first ray shot across her figure, toning the pale draperies to warmer tint.

She turned with a little sigh, and glanced to the equipage in the road below.

The sunlight swam about her figure in ever fiercer rays, making an aureole of limpid gold. The young vicar became confused, lifted his hat, and touched the pony's mouth.

"My aunt, Mrs. Vaughan, will call," he said.

She bowed again, and he passed on.

* * * * *

"Good morning. Did you come in very late last night?" Enid Mary arranged her napkin over her knees, and looked up to Henry taking his seat at the table.

"I reached home this morning," he answered.

"Morning! What time?"

"The sun was up."

"Good gracious! And did you spend the night in one of those hovels?"

He ignored the latter question. "The poor fellow is dead," he said, looking to Mrs. Vaughan.

"Dear, dear—what was it—an accident?"

"Yes."

Enid Mary made a "tch, tch," of disgust. "And now there will be the funeral, and of course it will come just on the day we want for something else."

"My dear!" interposed her mother.

Enid frowned.

Mrs. Vaughan's tones were severe reproof.

"It's no use scolding me, mother," the girl returned. "I always thought English country people were stupid enough, but Welsh——"

"You forget you are half a Welshwoman yourself," remarked Henry, glancing up with a smile from the business of chipping an egg.

Enid's face instantly flushed angrily.

"Certainly," said her mother, before the girl had time to speak. "It is not nice of you to forget that your father was a Welshman."

"I suppose there are Welsh and Welsh, though," was the retort, "the same as there are English of all sorts. I count myself English. Mother is English, and I've had an English education."

Henry laughed. "But education is cosmopolitan," he said.

Enid tried to look dignified. "I believe you are proud of your Welsh blood," she remarked.

"I'm not ashamed of it," he returned, smilingly.

Enid stared rather sulkily through the window as she nibbled a piece of toast.

"The whole place is so God-forgotten," she broke out again, "no one who hasn't the instinct of a hermit could call it home. I'm in a hurry to see the new neighbour at Cae'rmynydd—she's uncompromisingly English, thank goodness."

"Ah, I saw Miss Garland this morning," said Henry.

Enid Mary turned her head with interest in her face. "This morning—did you make a sunrise call, then?"

"No, she was out of doors."

"What time was it then?"

"The sun was just rising."

"How very peculiar. It must have been very early, because I wake sometimes and see the sun shining and then go to sleep again for hours."

"It was between four and half-past."

"Was she dressed—for out of doors?"

"I can't describe costume," answered Henry. "She was on her own domain."

"Did you speak to her?"

"Yes."

"Now that's interesting. What is she like, Henry?"

Henry glanced at Enid rather abstractedly. "I don't think I'm good at character sketching. She was quite an English woman."

"How do you mean?"

"In manner and bearing."

Enid raised her shoulders slightly. "Well-bred, of course."

Henry looked at Mrs. Vaughan. "I said you would call," he said.

She nodded. "We might go to-morrow, perhaps, she will understand our hurry to greet her."

"Was she tall or short?" asked Enid Mary.

Henry wrinkled his forehead. "I wasn't in a good position to make measurements," he answered. "Miss Garland was above my head."

"Where was she then?"

"Standing on that tallest rock near the road."

"How odd. I hope she isn't peculiar—one can't get on with those sort of people."

"She is merely an early riser, perhaps," said Mrs. Vaughan.

"It isn't a very fashionable habit," remarked Enid Mary, with a little twitching of the nose.

Henry and her mother broke into laughter in chorus. "Fashionable habits in Blaenafon would be a terrible burden," cried the former.

"I positively believe you adore your desolation," answered the girl.

Henry gave her a glance, smiled, and said nothing.

"Can we go fishing to-morrow?" She did not look at anybody to direct the question.

"Not if we call on Miss Garland," replied Mrs. Vaughan.

"The next day then?"

"Henry has a parish meeting."

Again Enid twitched her nose disdainfully. "Always something," she observed.

"You are not very consistent, my dear," said her mother. "You have been crazy to call upon Miss Garland almost before she had arrived."

"But it won't take all day, you see, mother dear—and a day is so long."

Mrs. Vaughan took no further notice of her daughter, but turned to Henry, and questioned him as to his vigil of the past night.

"And he was her only son," she said.

"Yes. But the old woman is well rid of a scoundrel."

"Good gracious!" interrupted Enid. "You don't seem the least concerned as to whether he has gone to heaven or not."

A heightening of colour tinged Henry's cheeks. He chipped a second egg absent-mindedly, and Mrs. Vaughan came to the rescue with the remark, "But I suppose she is much distressed at her loss nevertheless."

He looked up, collecting his scattered ideas. "Yes —and no." His colour surged more brightly over neck and brow. "She is elated at present—in a sort of exaltation, one might say, that she gives back to God ungrudgingly."

"What a beautiful idea!" exclaimed Mrs. Vaughan. "If she can only sustain that mood, how it will help her."

"She may do." Henry laid the top of the egg carefully on the side of his plate. "I—rather fancy she will," he added.

"Poor creature—I hope she will. It is so beautiful a pose for a mother."

He looked towards her quickly. "I—I tried to help her to that attitude—it seemed best——"

"I am sure it was," Mrs. Vaughan interposed.

"The man was comatose," resumed Ackworth, "past human aid."

"But your ministrations are not supposed to be human merely," observed Enid Mary, dryly.

After a moment's silence Ackworth glanced towards her.

"Very frequently it is most important they should be humane," he said.

Enid Mary tossed her head, lowering her eyelids slightly. "I thought you were a doctor of the soul, not of the body."

He mused an instant, choosing his words. "I am

afraid," he began slowly, "that I am a good deal at sea as to where the dividing line comes in."

"Why," cried the girl. "*I* have always had the idea that there was a sort of wall built of sins and shortcomings, and we lived on one side of it while we are on the earth, and the other side is heaven. On Sundays we are learning the way to pass safely through to the other side when death comes."

"My dear child!" Mrs. Vaughan's tones were amazed.

Henry's eyes were amused. "I think that is a very fair statement of the case, though," he said, "and quite the attitude of the multitude."

"Surely we are not such heathens, Henry," laughed his aunt.

"If we are, who is responsible but the clergy?" remarked Enid Mary in a resenting way.

"Who, indeed?" But Ackworth's tones had changed, and the finality in them seemed a definite termination to the conversation.

CHAPTER III.

WITHOUT it was certainly picturesque. The white-washed walls gleamed in the morning sunlight, the thatch was mellow toned, running from ripe browns to chastened gold, with patches of verdant moss interspersed and even vivid tufts of grass; the tiny windows, eighteen inches square, with panes of a hand's space, glittered as diamonds, reflecting the rays from central nodules glinting with green light. Within was gloom, a soft gloom, made up of an atmosphere of finely shredded peat smoke interpenetrating the yellow sunbeams, and the dull presence of massive pieces of furniture huddled in small space—a dresser of dark oak adorned with a multiplicity of jugs, a linen press, and a "coffer."

In the doorway opening upon this apartment a fresh coloured individual, wearing a spotless apron, was defined with a sharpness of contrast that dubbed her alien to her surroundings. She carried a jug in her hand.

"Have you got any milk to sell here?" she asked, in brisk, homely English accent.

A woman, with black tangled hair, a face burned by the sun to the tinge of the dark oaken dresser

and coffer, came towards her, and smiled—nothing more. Then somebody, outlined dimly amid the blue and gold of the atmosphere, rose from a low chair near the fire.

"Good-morning, ma'am. You come from the house at Cae'rmynydd, I daresay. We got a fine morning after the rain last night—ah."

He looked down at her shoes, then by degrees upward to the band of her apron, and so to her face at last.

The newcomer looked to the woman and repeated her question.

"Ah, indeed, the poor thing doesn't understand you, ma'am," said the man. "She ain't got not a word of English—very few has in this country. I've been about a bit myself and picked a little up. But she got plenty o' milk, poor thing, an'll be glad of a little money."

Then he spoke rapidly to his wife in their native tongue, and she at once held out two very grimy hands, nodded her head vigorously, and smiled with an exceedingly broad smile.

"Plenty of milk, plenty of milk," she cried in the vernacular, which naturally conveyed no meaning to the customer, seized the jug forthwith and disappeared.

"The lady was coming last night, I heard 'em say," the man remarked, "but I didn't hear anybody say what her name was."

He glanced inquiringly with his black beady eyes, suavely expectant of having his curiosity appeased.

But the stranger's sober countenance was too absorbed in subtle appreciation of her immediate surroundings to humour an inquisitiveness which could

only appear to her as impertinent. She glanced up to the roof poles—bare, with the thatch showing between.

"Ah," said he, following the trend of her eyes, "old-fashioned places you see in this country. We ain't got no ceilings as they have in the towns—not but what they are putting them in the new houses here, too—just a few planks laid across to make a loft where they can put the bed for the children." He lifted his hand as his wife appeared again bearing a brimming jug. "This place now my grandfather he built it, him and some neighbours, and 'tis a fair place to live in still."

Eliza Banbury's face was eloquent of disagreement with the latter statement, but she merely held out her hands for the jug, asking, "How much is it?"

The woman looked to her husband.

"Well," he said, in a reflective way, "she says perhaps twopence is not too much."

Apparently Eliza did not consider the demand exorbitant, for she presented the coppers at once, said "Good-morning" and turned to go.

The man followed her with a cry. "She says she'll be glad to give you milk every day, ma'am, if you like."

"Thank you," replied Eliza, but made no promises.

She went down the close, picking her way among pools of dark stagnant liquid, oozings from the piled manure outside the outhouses. She walked up the road for the length of two fields and pushed open a small gate set at the top of a short flight of grey stone steps. Yet more steps of the same rough stones led to a limited plateau—enough space for a

house to stand, and no more. Beyond, the ground rose again, showing a tangle of moorland growths—gorse yellowing to gold, tender shoots of young ferns peeping among last year's withered bracken, the burnt bells of dead heather, stunted blackthorn bushes just divesting themselves of their spring bridal array of snow bloom, the noses of rocks whose sides were green-patched with lichens. But Eliza entered the house with an exclamation that proved her a vandal of uncompromising quality.

"I never see such a God-forsaken hole in all my days."

A figure emerged from a room on the right.

"A voyage of discovery, Eliza! What's the last trouble?"

Eliza passed through a door on her left, set the jug of milk on the table, and twitched her head in a despairing way. "I best not tell ye where that's come from—else ye'd never touch anything for a week. I dunno how English stomachs are goin' t' be fed—talk about eating a peck o' muck afore ye die,"—she flung off her sun-bonnet, tossing it lightly to a peg behind the door. "It must be meat an' drink to 'em here."

"Is it a dirty place inside?" asked her young mistress. "Outside is picturesque."

"Maybe." Eliza twitched her nose with subtleties of reserved scorn. "But if you'd picked your way as I did through a yard as a decent English pig 'ud sniff at, ye might be of a different opinion. They say as cleanliness is next to godliness; at any rate ye don't often see one without the tother. Mucky outsides means mucky insides—allays as fur as I seen things. The woman as gev me that milk wanted

scouring out from top to toe, and the place smelt—ugh! the smoke ye could scarce see through it!"

"But the scent of the peat smoke is delicious, Eliza."

Eliza lifted a hand with a hopeless gesture. "There's no accounting for taste, they do say, same as when the old woman kissed her cow; but for my part I like summat a bit more wholesome."

Sarah crossed the passage to the kitchen threshold.

"What were the people like, Eliza?" she asked. "Did any of them speak English?"

"The man did."

"Oh, that's good news—I shall be able to talk to him straight off, then."

"I shouldn't think ye'd ever let yeself down s' fur as that. Why, we'd take him for a cadger at home—never owt else."

"Manners are different here, Eliza, you see."

"Manners! I ne'er called him to account for his manners. He wa' as polite as ye please; but wanted t' know too much—that's all."

"What did he want to know?"

"What your name wa'."

"Well, that was rather a natural curiosity—did you tell him?"

"Me?—not likely; who's he t' know your name, I should like t' know."

Sarah laughed merrily. "But he will have to know eventually. I sha'n't be able to live in the place nameless."

"Let him find out, then—he wa'n't goin' t' get things out o' me."

"Will they sell milk every morning—did you ask them?"

"No, there wa'n't no need t' ask—they wa' a good deal too ready t' offer."

"But it will be convenient—such a short distance away."

Eliza sniffed as she took up the tongs and began to mend the fire. "I shall ha' t' strain it through muslin afore I could ever stomach a teaspoonful on it."

"Oh, we shall have to learn not to be too fastidious. When you are in Rome you must do as Rome does, you know."

"If it comes t' eatin' as much muck in a week as ornary mortals swaller in a lifetime? Well, we none on us ever know what we shall come to. I'd never no idea as I should come t' live in a foreign country; an' it go a lot again the grain; for I'm a good deal like my father afore me, an' he never could abide foreigners—'Them poor blackamoors,' he used t' say."

"But our present neighbours are not black, you know, Eliza."

"They mayn't be by nature, but they got pretty near it by habit," was the dry retort.

The sunlight swam in at the open door, making a halo to the girlish figure on the mat. She turned, gazing out to the far hill horizon, at the moment wreathed in a wonder garment of softest film—a web of sunshine and mist, the night's breath not wholly dispersed by the morning's kiss. The land rolled and folded itself into nooks and pockets with cunning art, secreting wide tracks in sunny bottoms, or dimpling about a single homestead until its cloistered isolation gave the idea of desert solitude; whereas a short climb to a neighbouring hill brought into view

quite close at hand another homestead and another isolation as complete as the first.

April is the resurrection month. All the winds sing "O Death, where is thy sting?" and the earth, as at a call, stirs and breathes. The bleached hill-sides become glowing with new tones of colouring under the wonder-painting of April sunlight; and the trout streams flash and sparkle over the stones, turning each to a burning topaz; pads of creamy curded foam swirl in corners where the eddies have built them tier on tier like the icing on a twelfth cake; in the shadows flung by boulders the water runs dark as coffee.

Sarah walked to the door, passed out and down a rough flagged path, her eyes dreamy with thought. She descended the short flights of steps and came to the gate and halted. A flock of sheep was passing by on the road below. In April the sheep go up to the mountains from the lower slopes where they have been feeding through the winter months. The poor "tack" sheep roam and nibble over the bleached hill fields from October to April and sustain life, though at a low ebb, by some interior miracle; their asthmatic coughings sound weirdly through the stillness of wintry nights. Peasant owners also drive their small flocks to the "big mountains" as soon as the spring tillage is done; for in rough holdings the fencing is either faulty or non-existent, and the practice of having shepherds to guard the ploughed patches has fallen into disuse under the stress of School Boards and the demands of elementary education.

Sarah Garland watched the creatures passing with absorbed interest. They were mountain sheep—

small and trim in build, and wonderfully agile in their movements; they leapt in every direction to secure a nibble at the wayside grass, and the dog had much ado to obey the constant commands issued by his master in the rear of the throng.

The road on the opposite side was unenclosed, and the land fell in tumbling hillocks towards the river; the ground was scarred with scrub bushes, stunted gorse, and carpeted with fine mountain turf. Sarah wandered downwards, coming at length to the water's edge.

The winter had been long drawn-out and trying; now, suddenly, the weather had taken a volte-face and there was the phenomenon of genial airs, brilliant sunshine, a wine of wind rippling over the hills, and a stark-naked landscape with scarce a leaf to show that spring had come. The utter bareness of every twig and bough cried reproach to the long-delayed tempering of winter's harshness. The only sign at hand of awakening vigours was where a slender mountain ash shot upward, a lean shining bole, its thick pods swelling and bursting the fleece of their silver sheaths. Sarah remained so motionless that a bright-breasted bird sat on a stem above her head and called melodiously, "Bink! bink! bink!" in fluty staccato notes. She noticed other life astir—glistening-bodied beetles trundling through the grass; a lizard shooting across an unsheltered space—a flash of pearl tints shot with green.

At her feet the river babbled its seafaring song—by no means a monotone. The melody was silvern; but the great concords were full, even harsh in their complexity, changing and returning, fugue fashion, in a rich harmony that bore the simple theme as in

a cradle of sound. Mountain streams sing of the ocean, the Great Father whence they came and to whom they return; and there are mimic grandeurs of wave-splendour and tumult, the running of tides and the clamour of sea winds in the lilt and gurgle of their ceaseless chant.

Sarah moved slowly along the ragged edge of the bank, gazing into the mirror-like shadows, or into deep, quiet pools where endless mystery lurked. She strayed on. The sunlight played among her hair and revealed touches of gold amid the darker strands of brown, and soon the little breeze had ruffled her a coronal of curls on brow and temple, dragging fresh wisps momently from their smooth ranging. She came to a sheltered nook where an outcropping rock offered a seat, sat down upon it, and clasped her hands about her knees, staring into the water.

More than two years had passed since John Bennington's conviction and sentence. It had been the strangest period of her life. During the first weeks of realisation of her position there had come to her the sense of awakening, a gradual stirring of latent sensations whose existence had been hitherto unsuspected. And unrest had come, that inexplicable cataclysmic disturbance of the mind's ordered ways to which youth is subject, much in the same way, it would seem, as races and nations inaugurate new phases of being by mighty upheavals of the old ways. It had seemed to Sarah at the time that every part of her mental and emotional equipment warred one with the other.

Life under Aunt Julia's régime had been so entirely removed from every trace of unrest; looked at from the outside the whole movement possessed

rhythm, and a stately rhythm too; she had been one of those rare women who dispossess life of the trivial, investing all things rather with the meed of necessity which gives the smallest action dignity. Possibly the secret lay in that quick power of discrimination which selects or discards so unerringly that the unessential never has opportunity to exist. Undoubtedly she was a woman of strong character, but this in no sense meant harshness, narrowness, or even authoritativeness. Aunt Julia was a past-master in that peculiar charm of leading without disclosing the strings. Although a woman fairly advanced in years and a spinster too, when her small charges, Jim and Sarah, came to her, she brought to bear upon their upbringing and training a discernment and vigour of grasp that would have been rare even in the matron of mature years.

A slim little lady in grey silk gown and cap of delicate lace—that was her invariable costume, the age of the silk and the quality of the lace varying with the occasion. She had her gowns cut short and any little ornamentation removed when they came down to "morning" wear; the newest ones were for great occasions, those in the medium stage for ordinary afternoon and evening adornment; and so exquisitely dainty did she always appear in these simple but costly toilettes that her niece's taste was instinctively moulded on the same refined lines.

At quite an early age Sarah received a dress allowance and was permitted to act entirely upon her own discretion in the matter of her clothes; adverse comment was never known. When donning a new frock for the first time she would appear before her aunt and say, "Shall I do, please, Aunt Julia?" and after

a quick, comprehensive glance the reply was always the same. "Yes, my dear, nicely."

Since she had been alone, since Aunt Julia's going away, it had frequently appeared to Sarah that that had really been the attitude between them in all the doings of daily life. Whatever the occasion it had always been tacitly "Shall I do, please, Aunt Julia?" and generally the same tacit reply, "Yes, my dear, nicely."

In small matters this aspect represented existence to Sarah so long as Aunt Julia was mistress at Brux House, actively engaged in the many duties of her busy days; but now that her niece was standing back, as it were, to survey the past, for the purpose of adjusting the future by the light of the garnered experience, now she saw these things had been but the shell, the outer result of an inner working, the phenomenon of which the noumenon was Aunt Julia's very potent personality. The blow of her aunt's death, the actual cutting of the bond between them had not been realised at the moment of its happening; slowly, insidiously, it had entered her soul as iron.

She was startlingly alone. At every turn of the day's doings there were the subtlest lacks; the mainspring of existence was gone. Not that she was in any sense a characterless individual, she had ever been very definitely aware of herself and her own personality from earliest days; nor again had the late Julia Beechwood taught her niece to lean solely upon her elders for support and guidance; in quite the opposite spirit she was one to make every tub stand on its own bottom, as the saying went. Yet notwithstanding her training and peculiar idiosyncrasy of in-

dividuality, Sarah stood a good deal aghast at herself in the early months of her bereavement.

It was just at this time that John Bennington came into her life. He was visiting in the neighbourhood of Brux House, having recently returned from a long stay—in Canada, she understood. She knew the Bennington family but slightly; they were of an old county family, at the present time in somewhat straitened circumstances, which necessitated their living very quietly on the hereditary acres. Probably Miss Julia Beechwood had known all about the sending of the third son, John, to Canada when he was twenty-one, but of course neither Sarah, who was thirteen at the time, nor Jim, who was sixteen and at school, knew anything whatever of the young man's antecedent character. He was nine-and-twenty now, handsome, a man with a certain sparkle of personality, and manners that gave weight as well as grace to all his actions.

Perhaps of all subjects pertaining to mortal mundane affairs Miss Beechwood had said least upon that of marriage; possibly in her wisdom judging that here as elsewhere "experience teaches," and having no personal precedent upon which to sustain a theory, she counted herself an inefficient mentor. Consequently, Sarah felt herself much at sea as to the course she ought to follow when Bennington made her the offer of his heart, and she accepted him largely in the spirit of the experimentalist—and hoped all would turn out well. After all, it was not possible for her to take her aunt's place in its entirety; perhaps it was a duty to society that she should marry, and give her inheritance its proper responsible standing in the county.

Jim puzzled her a good deal. He said so little about the engagement, and only urged one point—"Don't be in a hurry with the wedding, Sally."

Then had come the ever strange, incomprehensible convulsion of things—Bennington's arrest, trial and subsequent imprisonment. She tried to look at the matter squarely, but the task was hopeless, the situation was as a fog enveloping her whole prospect; and she was entangled in a web which was but gossamer to the eye, but which the least movement revealed as strongest bonds.

From the first she had evinced disinclination to hold any communication with her lover.

"No, Jim, I can't see him."

"Then write to him."

"No, I cannot write to him either."

"I think it would be fairer to him to have it out at once—you can't marry an ex-convict."

She mused a moment ere answering: "*Would* it be fair to see him now? Wouldn't it be taking him at a disadvantage?"

Jim drew his brows together—"I suppose he's at a disadvantage all round just now, if you come to that."

She maintained the attitude in spite of all Jim could say. Her pledged word to Bennington had become bondage of a very vital sort—*she* could not release herself at his expense, nor sue that he should give her back her freedom at the expense of himself. Jim said with all respect that he thought the idea a bit Quixotic.

It ended there; or more properly, perhaps, from the point of view of the natural progression of things, it began. She was seized with subtle delicacies of

fears: the good folk of Red Barn End asked questions with their eyes; their very apparent anxieties concerning her comfort, her happiness, were too intimate; at times they pressed so close it gave her the sense of suffocation, as if indeed, remotely, they involved *her* in shame, and pitied her accordingly. She was tortured with the desire to hide herself from sympathy she only half understood and wholly resented.

So she went travelling many months with an uncle and cousin, until the marriage of the cousin broke up the party. Then she returned home, and tried to settle down in her old place in the world. But it was no use. She could not get rid of the feeling that, in reality, she was standing all this time at the cross-roads of her life, that she was waiting for some yet unknown force to give her the power of choosing her ultimate path.

An out-of-the way local paper came into her hand by chance, and in it she saw the advertisement of the house of Cae'rmynydd. She went down to the village next day and asked Eliza Banbury, her old nurse, if she could find it in her heart to lock up her cottage for an indefinite period and go to a strange country. Eliza said she didn't know how her heart might regard such a reversal of ordered goings-on, but she supposed where Miss Sarah went there she had better go also.

And here they were. Jim, with that remote look of comprehension in his eyes had acquiesced silently. Sally had got a good deal beyond his philosophy of life in the past two years—he didn't quite know whether she was growing or ingrowing, sometimes he feared the latter, until a chance insight into the

present workings of her mind placed his conclusions in abeyance once more.

Sarah sighed and woke out of reverie at last, and then heard a slight rustling at hand. She looked up to see a man drawing near.

She watched him as he approached, noting the shrewd intelligence in his heavy face, and the suave smile upon his coarse lips. He would be an ill-looking fellow under certain facial expressions, but now there was an atmosphere of actual polish in his bearing, which quite mastered the native loutishness. He was wearing an overcoat buttoned across his broad chest and shoulders, with the sleeves hanging loose; and his weather green hat was drawn sufficiently forward to form a veritable pent-house to his eyes. He tolerated her survey of his person with placidity, and greeted her with: "Good morning, ma'am. You got a fine morning and a comfortable seat."

"Good morning," she answered. "Do you live about here?"

"Yes, ma'am." He turned a little and raised his arm, pointing. "You're going to be neighbours of us—the old thatched place; I dessay you noticed it."

"Is it from your place that we had the milk, then?"

"That's it, ma'am. And I was saying to your servant when she fetched it as we hadn't heard anybody say at present what your name was."

"Oh, indeed." She surveyed him humorously.

He laughed a little as if he caught a hint of her attitude.

"We like to give a welcome to a new neighbour—and know summat about 'em, in a friendly way. You

see there ain't many of us and we feel kindly towards somebody coming fresh. Me and that woman o' mine was guessing as you was English, ma'am, and now I see we was right, on account o' you being s' fair-complexioned. The Welsh is generally dark if they ain't red, but you ain't red; it's what you'd call a brown—your hair, ma'am, if I don't mistake."

Laughter danced in her eyes. She assumed gravity by a big effort. "Yes, I am English."

"Yes, ma'am. That's why we couldn't make no guess at your name. You got s' many more names in English to what we have in Welsh. The young gentleman as is been here getting the furniture in he never said anything about names; but I dessay he was your husband."

"No, he is my brother."

"Hey, well now, that woman o' mine was right after all; she said as he wasn't old enough for a husband. I don't expect as you're a widder, though, ma'am, at your age."

"No, I'm not a widow."

"A—h—h—h!"

There was the melancholy of baffled longing in that lengthened syllable, emitted on a breath drawn to sighing cadence. He returned to the charge, however, with increased fervour. "Then the young gentleman's name and yours is the same, ma'am?"

"Of course. By the way, what is your name?"

He burgeoned with gladness. "Evan Pugh, ma'am. I was borned in that old cottage you see yonder—that's a good while ago now."

"Pugh—that's quite a Welsh name, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am. There been Pughs in Blaenafon since back when we didn't call people by two names

—just the father's name put on to tell which family a man belonged to. It was Hugh in the beginning, the father's name, and then it come to be ap Hugh, that is to say, the son of Hugh, and so it went on 'Ap Hugh,' running the two together like one, and it was John ap Hugh, or William ap Hugh, the sons of Hugh. You understand me, ma'am?"

"Oh, yes."

"We got a lot o' old fashions in this country—not the same as England—that's one of 'em. But we call most everybody by two names now—quite gr—r—rand."

"Is this your farm round about here?"

"Yes, ma'am. You're on my land this minute and sitting on my stone."

She liked the self-satisfaction in his tones; it sounded warm and well-established and patronising, as if she trod upon his roots with his hospitable consent.

"Yes. I got a good bit o' land as farms go in this country, but there's not much good in it—bog, a lot, and wet, and a man like me wi' not much time to do the work as is wanted."

"Have you another occupation besides farming, then?"

"Oh, no, ma'am—no, no." He glanced abroad with an air. He breathed leisure, as did the hills rolling to the far horizon.

"I'm thinking, ma'am, you'll find this a lonely country after England. We got such a few people here—a house here, a house there, poor bits o' places, the most of 'em with the rain running through the roof in the winter-time. Except the vicarage, now. I dessay you know Mr. Ackworth, ma'am, the vicar

—he's been in England many years getting his edoocation at the college at Oxford, and there's Miss Vaughan his cousin, too, and Mrs. Vaughan his aunt —they live at the vicarage this good bit now, since they lost the Major. They lived in England when he was alive."

Not desirous of appearing inquisitive, she said nothing when he paused; and he thinking she lacked interest in the subject pointed out a new object in the landscape. "That's the chapel—the Calvinistic Methodist—the building with the big windows."

"It's rather a large building," she said. "You must be very strong here. Are you a Calvinist?"

"*Me!* Me a damned old Methody! No, ma'am." He dropped from wrath to patronage. "You being a stranger here makes you make that mistake—I'm a churchwarden."

"Oh, indeed."

"Yes, we been church this many generations," he went on, "and I been churchwarden this good bit now—my father was before me. He used to get a bit drunk most any time he went to the town, but he was a good churchman for all that, and he was never too drunk to stand up for the church and damn the Methodies. Gum, ma'am, it would have done you good to hear him damn the Methodies. He was a man with a lot o' language."

Evan thrust out a forbidding under-jaw, and gazed abroad in threatening pose. "I could tell you a lot o' stories, ma'am, about them old Methodies," he said after a short pause.

"You are an enthusiastic churchman, I see," she remarked.

"Yes, ma'am, and I don't count as you be a

Methody, else you'll think a lot o' my bad manners blackguarding 'em. But the blood's in me to hate 'em."

"I'm not a Methodist, certainly," she replied.

"No, no, o' course not; a lady like you, ma'am, would sure to be church."

She smiled.

He looked preternaturally wise. "To be sure, you got no need to make a fuss—God don't have much call to be forgiving gentlefolks; they don't have no occasion to sin very often, like poor people—in a bargain when if you don't cheat a man he just turn round and cheat you—what is a man to do?—everybody is for himself. Yes, yes."

She looked at him dreamily; tubbed and groomed she thought he would have made a typical Jesuit, and there was all the gleam in the eye of the race that wins by artifice rather than courage. She was pondering the fancy in a half muse when he startled her with a question a thousand miles from the topic in hand.

"And I dessay we shall hear what your name is, ma'am, before very long."

She marvelled at the cunning, almost admired it as she answered laughingly, "My name is Garland."

Pugh thrust his head forward suddenly, with strained attention, the light of eagerness in his eyes. "What name did you say?"

"Garland."

"Ger—r—r—rland," he laboured painfully.

"Garland," she repeated.

"Ah, Ger—r—r—rland," he reiterated, "not a common name, ma'am. I never heard it afore in my life, an' I been in England, too. It's got a high sound

about it—I dessay you come of a good family, ma'am, in England. There's a lot o' very high blood there. I dunno how you'll make shift in this poor country—we ain't got no mansions for gentlefolks to live in. We be rather rough all round."

"But you are very picturesque."

He pushed his chin out, the attitude of listening. "I didn't jis' catch what you said, ma'am."

"You have beautiful scenery."

"Oh, yes, ma'am, Wales is very pretty, so they say. I hear 'em say so in England. England's got very good land and good crops on it, but she ain't got no hills—that's the difference."

He glanced up the opposite slope, lowering his eyelids to meet the sunlight, probably considering a new topic for converse, but she rose, thinking the interview had lasted long enough. "Good-morning."

"Oh, good-morning, ma'am. You're going in the house now. You got no hat on, I see, an' mos' likely you feel the sun too hot on the top o' the head. I did hear once of a man as was having sunstroke that way," he lagged at her heels as she climbed towards the road, "an' his mind was never the same never no more."

She walked a little faster, getting out of ear-shot.

CHAPTER IV.

"I THINK," said Miss Enid Mary Vaughan, "that Miss Garland is certainly queer."

She and her mother were walking along the sun-lit road between Cae'rmynydd and the Vicarage. They had just called on Sarah. Enid wore a summer frock in spite of the nip in the air that belied the brilliance of the atmosphere. May will smile her brightest on the mountains, but she bites at the same time. Mrs. Vaughan boldly carried her winter coat. She did not reply to her daughter's observation, but passed a smiling word with a woman standing beside her water-bucket at the roadside spring. Her Welsh was defective in accent, but a wholly sympathetic bearing conveyed the feeling of the salutation to the native, who beamingly answered, with a cautious glance upon Miss Enid, and no greeting for her.

"Really, mother, I wonder you try to twist your mouth with the stupid language—you'll never master it properly. How should you?—it's more like the clucking of hens than a human tongue."

"I certainly have no expectation of mastering it, my dear, but I can do a little, and I think it's nothing but a duty to try and get hold of it as much as we

can—how else can we ever have any intercourse with the people?"

"Positively, mother, you are as bad as Henry. He coolly offers to help me—as if I should dream of bothering myself with the heathen chatter."

"You will probably see differently when you are a little wiser, my dear. Miss Garland says she is going to try what she can do."

Enid Mary twisted her lips slightly. "That's what I said, if you remember, mother—she is certainly what you would call queer."

"She is not commonplace, at any rate," was the answer.

"She's not handsome, either," resumed Enid.

"Perhaps one would hardly accord her beauty as far as features went," Mrs. Vaughan remarked, reflectively, "but I think she will prove exceedingly charming."

"She didn't attract me at all." Enid closed her sunshade with a swish as they entered the shelter of some trees—the one oasis of tall green that the road boasted; there were bushes on the stone and clod banks fencing the fields, but few trees relieved the nakedness of these bare uplands.

"It would be better if you learned to be a little more sympathetic in your attitude towards others, Enid. It jars on one's senses greatly to hear nothing but complaint."

"Henry must be very soothing to you, then, mother—everything is right, according to his ideas, in this best of all possible worlds."

"Henry is very sensible."

"Which means that I am not."

"It would be better taste on your part to recognise

that you are among your father's people, that you take after him in a very striking way, and that our neighbours would be very proud of you if you did not offer such a forbidding front to them."

"You might spare me, mother. Surely I don't look so Welsh as that comes to."

"You might take it as a compliment, my dear. I have always myself had a great admiration for the type of Welshwoman you favour."

"But am I not the least little bit like you, mother?" the girl's voice took on a pleading tone.

Mrs. Vaughan laughed. "No, you are a true daughter of the Cymry. Indeed, Henry himself resembles me more than you do—he is such an Englishman to look at."

"I wish he were English all through," muttered the girl.

"We can at least say he is good all through," answered the mother.

Enid Mary simply pouted, and swished open her sunshade again as they emerged into the full glare of the sun once more. She held up her frilled muslin skirt, revealing further frills underneath. They passed an old woman resting on the bank, a creel well filled with peat beside her. She straightened her figure to drop a curtsey, clasped her hands in the attitude of obsequious delight, surveying Enid Mary up and down, then cautiously put out a peat-grimed finger to touch the sleeve of the girl's dress. "Beauty! Beauty! Fashion!" she ejaculated.

Mrs. Vaughan halted a moment to nod and smile. Enid drew away proudly from the prying finger.

"Good-bye, Lisa, *fach*, fine weather," stumbled the elder, as they moved on.

"Yes, indeed, yes, indeed!" cried the old woman, nodding eagerly, and curtseying again. But when she saw only their backs the smile wiped itself from her face in a flash, and she stared at the girl's handsome figure with eyes deep and dark as a well. She hoisted her creel to her shoulder in a minute, and trudged on, her body bent half double under the load. She chewed her gums and muttered a phrase at intervals, gazing on the ground as on a book from which she read.

A short distance along the road Henry Ackworth sprang to the highway over a stile from a field path. The peat-carrier raised her eyes, and, seeing who it was, slowly let her burden to the ground.

"How art thou, Lisa?" he cried.

"Oh, just common, sir, just common," was the reply.

"What—is the firing short? Are you carrying this home?"

"Yes, a bit from the mill—they give it me to bake bread—I can find a few sticks on the road to boil the kettle, but the bread must have the turf."

"It's rather a load, isn't it?"

She lifted her hands with a pleased smile. "*Bach*!—no! I am strong."

"How are the chickens?"

"They are better now—but seven died, and the disease is coming to every house now—they find seventeen dead one morning all at once at the Hendre."

"Dear, dear! That is bad fortune!"

"Bad fortune, indeed, sir."

"But what is the disease, and what the remedy?"

She shook her head. "'Tis something on them," she answered vaguely.

"But we ought to find out what it is, and try to fight its progress."

She wrinkled a little more her well-seamed forehead, slowly impressing negation upon him. "There is no use if God send it. Perhaps we have sinned, and it is to punish us. It is like the plague of Egypt—perhaps."

Ackworth looked at the woman, and then at her standing creel with the rich brown peat bricks; he inhaled the faint bog odour. Always the same difficulty—was he to be mere priest or man to this fellow-creature? Should he utter well-seasoned platitudes, showing the error of attributing ill-fortune to God instead of to bad management, or leave the picturesque unspoiled? He ran a glance over the furrows of her face, riven by the ploughshare of many winds, dyed by the glare of many summer suns, and pondered the woman as she stood, a thing of infinite charms, of subtlest suggestions, haloed in a glamour that her environment cast, she but a phase of the self-same nature that painted the wayside weed blossom, stained the grasses with the new greens of spring, bronzed the leaves of autumn, fused music into the tinkle of the stream, shot the lights on the birds' wings. She watched him as he mused, following the trend of his eyes at length and noted, topping a hill that showed on a looping of the road, the white glimmer of Enid's parasol.

"Ah!" quoth she with sudden vehemence, turning back her glance to his face, and pressing a forefinger on his arm. "Mind you, now; mind you, now, Vicar. She has the beautiful face, but not the good heart."

Her words brought him out of his dreaming with swift recoil. He had stared at the glimmer of white on the hill without taking in the sense of any personality attached thereto. It flashed upon him unpleasantly that the woman meant Enid. He braced his wits to find phrases of kindly intent for the absent. It brought to his mind also that he had been expecting to meet his aunt and cousin at Cae'rmynydd where he was now going to pay his first pastoral visit. Evidently they had not waited for him. He smiled with raillery upon his companion, crying, "Lisa, *fach!* Och! not a good heart behind the beauteous face? Sure to be! Sure to be! Doesn't God shine in all His flowers?"

Lisa half shut her smoke-bleared eyes, peering upon him with cunning criticism. "Nay, she is no flower. She is like her own hillsides—bleak and bare, bleak and bare, that will not shelter one little bird when the storms blow, but lets it die on their breasts. Och, indeed!"

"Lisa! Lisa!" he tried to be more frolicsome. "I know the secret—Miss Enid does not yet speak the dear tongue, and you are jealous, you think she does not love 'hen Gymru.'"

The old woman nodded her head dogmatically, but not with assent. "When I was a maid," she said, "God wot—how many years have gone since then! —we went to Daniel Mountain to find our true lovers. We put a bare knee on the hearthstone—but it is not wise to speak of such things abroad. A man or a maid must go alone, and hear the truth with his own ears alone. Daniel is very old now, but he knows many things—let him tell you the secret, Vicar, before you wed a woman."

Here it was again. Ought he not to chide her for gross superstition. But he had dared once before, and had the witch of Endor conclusively clapped in his teeth for his pains.

So he smiled, shaking his head, trying to be jocular. "I have no time to marry, Lisa." He waved his hand round: "With my big parish, my big family to visit—how should a man have time for a wife?"

"But if she sits waiting on his own hearthstone?" was the cunning rejoinder.

"Pooh! pooh! Lisa, *fach!* Too much chatter over the knitting needles in the evenings."

She laughed, shaking an unconvinced head. Then stooped over the creel, leisurely preparing to hoist it to her shoulders.

"On the wedding day, Vicar, I'll be up with the sun to make the bride's barrier." (Referring to the practice of setting obstacles on the way to church to hinder the couple from reaching it.)

He smiled, gone a-dreaming again, and turned to walk beside her.

"You are not going home?" she questioned.

"No, to Cae'rmynydd, to see the new neighbour."

"Och! she is English—they tell me."

"Well, is it not good to be English?" he asked.

She made a grimace of which he only caught a side glance.

"Thieves—all," she replied.

"Come, come, that is such an old tale," he cried.

"It is so true as it is old," was the retort. "They take all the good land from old Cymru, and call it another name—England, and drive the Cymry far to the hills, where there is nothing. I know it well, all the old men say so when I was a child. They

sit round the fire in the winter and tell one another tales of the time that was gone long ago, and my grandfather had a book with the story in—the robbers!"

He "tched!" "tched!" impatiently in his cheek.

"And my father used to go to the harvest in England when I was a child, and he tell us of the big fields of splendid land filled with crops such as we never see in Wales, and fat cattle, and good houses, and it all was taken from our fathers in the back time. Robbers and thieves—all!"

What was the trend of evolution to this simple soul? She saw but the iron heel of the oppressor, the flashing sword of the usurper, not an instrument in the hands of that mysterious force that makes and unmakes nations, bends a people to an inviolable will, moulds and shapes to ever fresh patterns until the map of the ages unrolls in wondrous devices, revealing the great scheme that to the little bearers of each little part appeared only as chaos.

They drew near to Cae'rmynydd.

"Lisa, I am English, too."

"Och! Only in the face of thee, Vicar. Thou hast the true Cymro heart," she cried, using the familiar second person in her enthusiasm.

He put a foot on the lower step of the Cae'rmynydd flight. "Well, good-bye, now, Lisa."

"Good-bye, now, sir."

Sarah saw the parting from her position high poised on the top corner of her domain—how genuinely the young man smiled upon the old woman. She went down to meet him. Up to the present he had been a dream figure in her mind, appearing mysteriously amid the phantasmagoria of

fancy that had made her rise at dawn on her first morning in Blaenafon, and go out to see the sunrise.

"I had thought to find my aunt and cousin here," he said, "but I caught a glimpse of them on the homeward route."

"Yes, they left some time ago. They mentioned that you might join them—but did not wait. The tea is cold. But some fresh shall be ready in a few minutes," she added, as they went indoors.

"Not on my account, please. I had a cup in a cottage on the mountain half-an-hour ago."

"Then you have afternoon tea even in the wilds," she observed with a smile.

Her smile arrested his attention. "It's a refreshment always at hand with the good folk," he answered. "The teapot is always in the ashes."

Then there was a moment of mutual criticism.

"Are you going to like our wild country?" he asked.

She smiled again. "I'm in the homesick stage at present."

"That's a good sign," he returned. "It's quite an old-time virtue, you know. It means you are tenacious in your affections."

Her face became thoughtful for an instant. "I don't know whether it's a virtue, after all. I suspect the force of habit, and—other things, possibly."

He noticed sudden abstraction in her manner which lingered to some extent while he chatted about the neighbourhood and people. At mention of Pugh, she spoke again.

"That is the man who is one of your churchwardens, is it not? I made his acquaintance this morning."

"Did you?—you'll find him a chattering rogue."

"He seemed capable of plying me with conversation indefinitely."

"He will—if you will listen to him."

"But what of his work—he farms, I understand."

Henry smiled. "In time you will learn what that means here. With Pugh his farm does not supply him so much with an occupation as a means for his wife to procure them daily bread—she is the working partner."

"The man is lazy, then?"

"If you put it that way. I don't think any of us quite think of him as merely idle—it would be coming too near with home thrusts." He laughed pleasantly. "There's a lot of lotus-eating here, you'll find."

She weighed his meaning with lids a little drawn over the eyes, an amused smile on her lips. "I suppose as a newcomer I must not take things too literally," she said.

"I think that will be the advisable course," he returned. "And it's a country where prejudices simply won't wear."

"Ah—I could fancy that," she smiled. "I have the notion that I must feel my way."

"Quite so."

"A few ready-made enthusiasms won't carry anyone far."

"Simply nowhere." He looked at her, meeting the frankness of her gaze with equally frank pleasure.

"I shall enjoy just *nosing* about," she said.

He laughed. "Shall we have the pleasure of your society for long?"

She became slightly abstracted again, and he felt rebuffed, and stood up to go, a little smitten in self-

esteem, as she answered, "I can't say definitely—for the summer, at any rate."

"Then you will not see us at our best," he returned, scanning her face as the smile came back.

"No?"

"Our storm grandeurs are the finest effects."

"I can imagine that."

Taking it for granted that fresh tea would be wanted, Eliza now appeared with it, and so, although he was on the point of departing, the visit was lengthened while he partook of a cup. He watched Sarah with deepening attention, wondering wherein lay the difference between her and Enid Mary.

His thoughts were still busy with the same subject as he went homewards. Half-way towards the vicarage he met Pugh.

"Indeed, sir," began the man, "I been on the road this good bit waiting for you to go by to speak to you, although there's that poor woman o' mine carting muck all by herself—poor thing, and me ought to be helping her a bit; not but what you know, sir, how the poor thing delights in work—any sort, it don't matter, the hardest, if it's a man's work she like it all the better."

Ackworth faintly nodded as agreement with a statement of facts it was useless to controvert.

"Yes, sir—the poor thing she ain't got no manners, being as ignorant as the new-born child, and I said to her when she put her plan to me, 'We must wait and find out what's the right thing to do, else we'll get the credit o' no manners among the Welsh.' It's a chicken, sir, as she got killed and feathered for a present to the new lady at Cae'rmynydd. You know there's some disease among the hens going round to

the houses all over the parish like a thief in the night, and the folks are finding them dead as many as a dozen at a time. I says to 'em, the silly women making a great noise about the bad luck, I says to 'em, 'there ain't no manner o' use for you to cry out against God, He's punishing you women most like for your chattering tongues; He got to show you now and again as He ain't satisfied with the way things go on, same as He had to with the Egyptians dealing falsely with the Israelites. Don't you waste no money buying stuff at the chimist's to cure 'em.' I says to 'em, 'you mend your ways, that'll be the best way to mend the hens——'"

"But what of the chicken you spoke of?" interrupted Ackworth,

"Why, sir, it loked very bad this morning when that woman o' mine went in the barn first thing; she could see it was sure to die afore the day was out, and so she think to herself that if she kill it to make a present to the new lady it would be very nice. But I wouldn't let her take it till I had a word with you, sir, whether it would be manners to offer it without no money for it—she got such a good heart, poor thing, she want to give anything away she got, no matter how she want the money."

Ackworth tipped back his hat a little and frowned slightly.

"If the chicken was diseased, and ready to die, of course you must not offer it to anybody."

"But it didn't die, sir; she kill it. Oh, de—ar—r—r, no, if it die we never think of offering it to anybody—we just eat it ourselves."

"You would run a great risk—you might make yourselves ill."

Pugh thrust out his lips into a bunch of many wrinkles. "Indeed, sir, I never heard of nothing happening to nobody, and we done it many times."

"Well, you certainly must not offer it to anyone either as a gift, or for sale; and I strongly advise you not to touch it yourselves."

"Indeed, sir, that is hard on that poor woman o' mine; she took such a pleasure in getting the feathers off, and gutting it——"

The vicar passed on.

CHAPTER V.

SARAH, clad in black garments from head to heel, with only the relief of a little white at neck and wrists, set out from Cae'rmynydd at eleven o'clock. With a forty minutes' walk before her, she calculated to be in sufficient time to take a remote share in the ceremony of burying old Mali's son. She had been assured by the young vicar that her presence would in no way appear as an intrusion, but as a kindly attention on the part of a newcomer.

"I'm blessed if I'd go to their funerals," declared Eliza with grudging approval of her mistress's sable costume. "Why, ye might go an' catch all sorts o' diseases from the dirty toads."

All the ways in Blaenafon wound either up or down, and the road between Cae'rmynydd and Bwlch Gwyn was no exception to the rule. Sarah had been directed to "follow her nose" in simple parlance, "an' you can't miss the house, ma'am," said Pugh in suave manner, "because you'll see the people going to it from all over the parish."

But a toilsome road on a bright April morning—April melting into May—if it be a mountain road, offers charm enough for the least sympathetic. Finding her black coat much too warm for the

temperature, Sarah halted at intervals to cool a little and survey her surroundings. It was a straggling path between rough stone-and-clod banks, and these were broken in many places, with the fallen clods still littering the way. Over the fences were uneven fields, some in pasture, green with the vividness of mountain turf at its first springing after the bleach of the winter months; others with the black peaty soil recently turned by the plough, sown, and harrowed in a rudimentary fashion. And everywhere tumbling hillocks and outcropping rock, lichen broidered. Somewhere a streamlet made music over the stones, rippling tunes on the air with silver intonation; and once she caught the louder swish of water falling from a height—the rush and leap from one rock to another, miniature Niagaras, that make pools of creamy foam in the swirling bottoms. Homesteads with whitewashed walls gleamed in the sunlight, black-patched cattle grazed the meadows, labouring horses climbed and descended the steep tracks, and men, hill men with bodies gnarled as trees that have weathered storms since sapling days, wandered in attendance—slow, ruminant, yet quickly alert at sight of the stranger. Some nodded, friendly wise; others, with a boorishness that was animal in its nervous timidity, looked on the ground as they went by.

Up and up; no dwellings bordered the road; they lay at wide intervals, dotting the landscape, none intruding on the isolation of another; the house, barn, stables in a huddle of a few yards space, picturesque oases amid many acres of sterility that even sunlight could not disguise. The whole area, as far as the eye could reach, spoke of harsh necessity as the sole



incentive to wresting scanty crops from so grudging a bosom.

Sombre clad pedestrians caught up Sarah and passed on, a few bestowing a smile upon her, others but an alert glance, quickly placed, and as quickly removed. She wondered at their rate of progression —it exceeded hers by such easy lengths; and yet they moved with apparent leisureliness—body stooping, hips rocking, the feet planted in the characteristic and determinate manner of the duck.

As the road mounted higher the fields were unenclosed, and grass grew in ridges between the wheel tracks and the treading of the horses' feet. And at last, nearer the highway than any other building, Bwlch Gwyn loomed in sight—a hovel, no more, with its thatch sagging inwards, the bare roof poles of the cow-shed sticking out like bones through skin, the thatch itself dark and stained with the drenchings of innumerable wild nights. About this as a centre people stood in groups and talked with each other.

Sarah strolled across the short turf and stood on the outskirts of the throng. A solitary stunted tree leaned over the roof of the cabin, its leaves ruffled slightly by a little wind that swept with refreshing coolness across the hilltop. Yet higher land rose to the south and east and west, forming a sort of cup in which Bwlch Gwyn nestled, and hiding the far Atlantic horizon where brown sailed trawlers crept along the rim of the world.

Sarah looked round in surprise when a touch upon her arm startled her from reverie. A neatly clad individual, arrayed in worn homespun suit, and clean collar, a black spotted tie, and a high-crowned, square built hat, murmured in her ear, "Indeed, ma'am, if

you was to go a bit nearer the door I daresay somebody would make room for you to go inside, and then you'd hear Mr. Ackworth better, and the singing, and see the lifting of the body."

Pugh moved along, piloting her, but when they reached the vicinity of the door such a very crowded interior revealed itself, that she halted. "I'll stay outside, I think, please."

"As you like, ma'am. I was thinking as you was a stranger you'd be liking to see what was going on."

He stayed beside her. A murmurous voice penetrated the outer silence.

"You can hear Mr. Ackworth, ma'am?" he whispered.

She inclined her head.

How alive was the whole world! A lark swung himself upwards from a tuft of ground near by, breaking into song, trilling shriller, sweeter, as he ascended until a black speck against the blue was all that remained visible of his quivering little body. Thick growths of rushes spiked the land all round Bwlch Gwyn, the moist green of the present spring crop mingling with the golds, browns and ruddy crimsons of last year's storing; snowy lambs maaed plaintively, answered by the deeper baa of their ewes; ponies stood at gaze; calves just taken from maternal nourishment, blared unmusically; cows reflectively nosed among the coarse herbage for sweet fresh shoots. It seemed one of the world's mockeries that Death was in the midst of this.

The lark's song was drowned at length by a lifting of voices within the hut. There was a stir among the gathered folk without, the sexes dividing, the men forming one group, the women another. The

hymn rose and fell, swelled and sank, lifted itself as on wings of sound, then dwindled to tragic wailing. The mode was minor in every trill and cadence.

"They are lifting the body now," murmured Pugh, in Sarah's ear.

Slowly the crowded interior began to ooze outward; the vicar emerged hat in hand, followed by the bier bearing the coffin, a line of men supporting it.

The hymn wore its way through another verse. The bier was gently hoisted to the height of the men's shoulders, rested thereon, and all was in readiness. Forming themselves into a line about four abreast the men paced after the vicar, who walked in front, solitary; the coffin and its bearers came next, and the women after, in rough procession in the same fashion as the men. The hymn trailed piercingly through the radiant air as the cortége moved away.

"If you'd like somebody to walk with, ma'am, that woman o' mine would be very proud——"

"No, thank you," was the hasty reply.

Pugh went to take his place among the ranks of his own sex, in readiness to perform his share of the carrying. At intervals of two or three minutes, decided by one who paced at the side with a watch in his hand, the men stepped from the moving column in relays and took the places of those already bearing the bier.

Foremost behind the coffin walked the dead man's mother—old Mali, her bowed figure neatly shrouded in a shawl that had once been black, but now was weather green, paled on the shoulders to mellow rust tints. Her daughter supported her, but she walked vigorously, and only when her hand went within the

pent-house of her mushroom hat to wipe the rolling tear did anybody know that she wept.

"Surely she was a hero's mother," thought Sarah, little guessing the meanness of the clay they now bore to its burying.

Through sunlit paths, riding over hillocks like black billows, the procession wound towards the churchyard, the vicar in front, always solitary; and when the road bent about a shoulder of hill, Sarah could see his head slightly bowed, and his hat in his hand.

She became critical about him. His figure was in such contrast to those about him; was he in keeping with the scene, or, like herself, an alien visitant? Something queer, a fleeting emotion, touched her, there was a throb as of tears under her eyelids—for the life of her she could not explain why.

As they neared the church he hurried forward and appeared later at the gate attired in cassock and surplice to meet the corpse.

He began to read, and the people spread themselves about the green enclosure; for there was not room for all to enter the church. Pugh, in his office of clerk, kept close at the vicar's elbow, uttering the responses with unctuous resonance.

After a little while Sarah sauntered to the door. Ackworth's voice came forth in rich tones. She stood, with downcast eyes, hearing the words whose sense could not reach her, yet whose meaning suddenly pierced her through and through. Was it the voice of the reader that thus infused such poignance into empty syllables? She peered within. Old Mali and her daughter knelt with heads bowed on the coffin. Drawing her prayer-book from her pocket

Sarah searched for the burial service, and tried to follow with her English version. The words were indeed very splendid—she had scarce ever noticed them before: "I am even consumed by thy heavy hand"; "thou makest his beauty to consume away, like as it were a moth fretting a garment"; "For when thou art angry all our days are gone"; "Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept"; "There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars"; "It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption; it is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory"; "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"

At length they began to leave the church. It was like the movement of a song; Sarah followed automatically, and they came to the grave. She read the English words persistently. "Man that is born of woman has but a short time to live." Ackworth's voice swelled a little and sank. What glorious syllables rolled over his lips—she couldn't get at the meaning of one of them, and yet, with his reading, the very soul of the service rent her with subtlest, acutest emotion, as it must have rent those who first planned its stately rhythm. When the clods clanged upon the coffin lid, the young vicar's voice took on she knew not what of pity, agony—"*Daear i'r ddaear, lludw i'r lludw, pridd i'r pridd*" (earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust). But the flat English rendering of that tragedy of body can never realise it one hundredth part as do the splendours of the tongue of ancient Britain.

Ackworth, eyes adream, regardless of the book in his hands, poured forth the words as one inspired.

His flock, so easily stirred to great emotions, gazed upon him as upon a prophet. "I heard a voice from heaven, saying unto me, Write, From henceforth blessed are the dead which die in the Lord; even so saith the Spirit; for they rest from their labours." It seemed to them that he verily heard the voice. Men's ruddy, weather-scarred faces became wan and wistful, the eyes fiery as they dwelt breathless upon the music of their pastor's language; women grew timid, tearful, upheld by a reverence painful in its intensity.

The service concluded, the benediction pronounced, all remained in their places in perfect silence, as is the custom of the country, while men with shovels came forward, and began the work of filling in the grave. The relatives never leave until all is finished. But at sound of the first shovelfuls of the shaly mould thundering upon the coffin lid poor old Mali's motherhood rent her utterly. The tragedy of the body!—so real to the simple with their necessarily material outlook. It was the body she had borne within her own—bone of her bone, flesh of her flesh, and now indeed was it torn from her when the cold sods were to shut it from sight for ever. With a wild piercing cry she flung herself forward, and would have fallen headlong into the grave had not many hands been instantly thrust out to rescue her.

Sarah, absorbed, intent on every phase of the scene, was blinded by a sudden rush of tears. She took a step forward, looking to Ackworth, as if he alone could comfort.

He took the poor, claw-like hands, that were wildly beating the air, within his own, and chafed them gently, and cried in ringing tones, as one who stirs

the fainthearted, "Mali, *fach!* Hast thou not given Dafydd back to the Lord?"

She was soothed, tamed instantly, but the heart cry of her anguish must have vent in words. "Oh, Vicar, but it is hard, hard!" And she shrank together, a quivering, tortured fragment of humanity, depending upon his supporting arms.

And the sunlight was over all, unwinking; the hills rolled in endless miles of dusky splendour, sheathed in gossamer mail, the sparse pasture mapped out with grey stone walls; the valleys with their trees and greener growths were pictures studding a vast canvas washed in faint gold tints.

CHAPTER VI.

"WE shall only be too glad to offer such services as we are able to render, Miss Garland, but in duty bound I must tell you that I, myself, am but a poor crutch to lean upon. I've got such a stubborn throat—it simply *won't* reshape itself to meet the exigencies of a guttural language; I suppose I am really getting too old a dog to learn new tricks. But Enid, I assure you, can do it really well, only she——"

"Only she won't," chimed in that young lady from her seat near the window.

"Certainly, that is the barest fact," returned her mother. "Henry tells me it is often so—that young people find little difficulty, where older throats seem to be too stiff. In which case," she concluded with a smile, "you are not likely to have much difficulty."

"You see, mother, Miss Garland is still in the enthusiast stage; in a month she will be exactly where I am—rebellious."

"I certainly hope not, and," Mrs. Vaughan glanced at their visitor, "if Miss Garland will forgive me offering an opinion, I do not think so either."

Enid shrugged her big shapely shoulders, raised her black eyebrows until they almost met the equally

black curls on her forehead. "We shall see," she said. "Shall we lay a wager, mother? I'll wager you a pair of those gloves you need so badly—all out of my own particular pocket money. There, is not that generous to stake actual money upon one's opinions? Don't you think so, Miss Garland?"

Sarah had a way of smiling that Enid Mary did not like. She drew her brows together now, trying to understand it—it seemed to include her, along with other matters of small importance, within the kindliness of a big tolerance.

"Pray," she began, "when we have all got hold of this amazing language—what shall we do with it? Shall we be expected to dive into the creepy mysteries of those awful cottages, and drink afternoon tea?"

"I admit that is the way my ambition lies," answered Sarah.

Enid made a grimace. "'Where ignorance is bliss,'" she quoted. "Have you ever been inside one?"

"Not yet. I'm at present rubbing up my powers of ingratiation, hoping I may be 'asked in' some day." She laughed merrily, looking to Mrs. Vaughan, instead of to the last speaker.

"Oh, we can help you in a small matter like that," said Mrs. Vaughan quickly. "Come with me when I pay my little visits—I have one or two on my list at present; it will interest you, and you will be able to pick up a phrase or two as well, perhaps; though Henry declaims against that very much—he wants us all to get hold of the language in its purity, and not the patois of the people; but I am free to admit that I am only too thankful to pick up phrases from their lips."

There was a little silence after Sarah had accepted the offer of introduction. Enid Mary stared through the window; Mrs. Vaughan busied herself with threading her needle; and the caller took advantage of the pause to examine Enid Mary with slightly quizzical eyes. The girl was exceedingly handsome, and even to the newcomer's inexperienced eyes, every inch a Welshwoman. There was the same breadth of shoulder, the muscular limbs, the jet black hair, dark flashing eyes, heavy brows, a complexion of ivory pallor. The type was common enough among the hill-women, more particularly among the elder ones—a splendour of physical charm emanating from their personalities, bronzed and weatherbeaten though they were. The younger race is impoverishing itself with the fastidiousness of modern dress, which, with the need for the heavy muscular development their labour demands, sows the seed of future feebleness, brings about deterioration of beauty, and much present discomfort. But fate had not called upon Enid Mary to use her magnificent physique save as whim and caprice decided, and so her contours were not marred, nor her tintless skin seamed or dulled by spot or blemish. If her carriage had been a little less conscious, dependent for its grace merely upon natural gestures, her bearing would have been in keeping with her colouring and shapeliness, and worthy of an empress.

"Here is Henry," she said at length, and leaned from the window, smiling, beckoning.

He appeared in a moment, removing his hat and wiping his forehead, remarking, "It's like a June day."

He did not look within the room, but stood side-

ways, facing the garden, where the trees in spring splendour of blossom, gleamed white and faintly pink.

"We're going to have a good fruit crop this year," he said, with the gratified air of the proprietor.

A little smile ran over Enid's lips. "Are you not going to say 'how do you do' to Miss Garland?" she said, in a tantalising way.

He turned sharply. A glance, a moment's hesitation, and he was gone, and although he reappeared in the doorway of the room within a minute's time, Enid's countenance had changed when he arrived.

"I won't apologise," he said as he came towards Sarah. "It would be hypocrisy. You will soon learn that afternoon callers are quite too rare for anyone to pretend to be in readiness to receive them." He glanced at himself, "I'm travel-stained, as you see, but—I'm a workman," and he laughed.

"Why don't you call yourself a labourer in God's vineyard?" interposed his cousin.

He looked at her, grave, thoughtful, either weighing her words, or balancing judgment; then he smiled. "Well, you know, there's only presumptive evidence that I occupy so lofty a position."

She was puzzled, and showed it in a slight flushing of the cheeks and a baffled glance from her splendid eyes; she was angry, too; why should Henry try to make her look silly in company? He knew she never pretended to be clever—she hated clever women. She decided on the spot that Miss Garland *was* clever.

That young lady was observing the vicar as he gave the attention to his cousin that had been wrested from herself. She had not seen him since

the funeral until now, and she had the sense of meeting him again for the first time. Her mind was filled with the picture of that lone churchyard among the hills, its greensward dotted with sombre clad natives, a bereaved woman, a dead man, and—another who was as wine is to water, who was soul, spirit, as the rest were but body, he was light as they were but dimness. Apart from the ceremony that had taken so strong a hold upon herself, she remembered the faces of the gathered mourners—tense, elate, wistful, or reverent, all drawn by the one magnet—the officiating clergyman, to that single point of interest that must be common to all humanity, the ending of things as far as the body goes, the vague wonderment as to another world than this.

She had spent much time in making and remaking the picture to its minutest detail in her mind. While he read with that inspired absorption he had seemed to her charmed eyes a creature of another plane of being, but when, wrung with pity for merely human woe, he held old Mali in tender arms, there was the flesh and blood man that stirred the heart even as the other uplifted it. She watched his face now as he talked with his cousin, trying to read its strength in the finely arched spiritual brow, the eyes that held a piercing quality when directly addressing another, but a mystic's dreaminess at other times. He was bronzed as a sailor; he breathed fresh air; there was the tang of hill winds in his atmosphere—nothing of the recluse.

"And what do you think of our grey old hills, Miss Garland, now you have had a little elementary experience of them?"

She smiled. "If I say simply 'I like them' it

will be but a platitude, and if I try to praise them you will only discover my ignorance."

"You must stay till the winter," he said. He glanced into her face, apparently measuring her. "You will like them better in storm than sunshine —I do."

"If I were Miss Garland, I should advise you to speak for yourself, Henry," remarked Enid.

"I do," he cried, with a certain eagerness. "I speak solely for myself—but one may—suspect—for another," he looked to Sarah to accentuate his meaning.

"I believe you are quite right," she answered, "I've had that premonition already. I went out last night just to *feel* the darkness—it was rather exciting." She coloured, looking to Mrs. Vaughan, conscious suddenly of shyness.

"You are braver than I," said that lady. "I admit it boldly—I'm a coward after dark. It's so eerie."

"Yes, but it attracted me," observed Sarah, "it laid hold of one like a presence. I stayed out for an hour."

"And where did you go?" asked Enid Mary.

"Oh, I didn't venture off my own premises—I just walked about, or stood still, as the fancy took me."

"What an odd thing to do. Didn't you get creeping things on your clothes from the grass, and bushes?"

"I don't know—I never noticed."

"Goodness, you are as cool as a man—at earwigs—I *can't* endure an earwig. Mother is as bad."

Mrs. Vaughan gave a slight, amused shrug. "I

can't deny it," she said, "though I'd so much rather tell you I was brave."

"I don't call that sort of thing bravery," chimed in her daughter, "it's merely—*nastiness*."

The others broke into laughter in chorus. "Really, my dear," said her mother as soon as she could speak, "you are not very complimentary. For my own part I'd give a great deal to get over those little squeamishnesses."

"You must admire Miss Garland, then," was the rejoinder.

"I certainly envy her." Mrs. Vaughan spoke with sudden curtness. Then turned to Sarah, speaking in her customary genial way: "Please let an old woman give you a word of advice, Miss Garland. Our evenings are very treacherous—always put thick wraps on when you go out after sundown."

"Yes, it is a pneumonia country," observed Ackworth, who had been apparently waiting for the trivialities of Enid's remarks to pass before reverting to the topic in hand. "Yes," he continued, "you'll like the hills in winter time, autumn, and in gloomy weather——"

"Pity us—mother and myself, Miss Garland," interrupted Enid once more. "We came in the autumn and had to weather a winter to begin with. You are more fortunate."

"One gets the fancy," pursued Ackworth, "that grim humours are more in keeping with the actual temper of the hills than sunlight—but I'll not pretend to preach. I might destroy your best illusions —impressions must be first hand. Right on the top, where it is cruelly bare, not a stub bush even to shelter a bird, it is magnificently grand in a winter

storm. I have to admit that it intoxicates me and so I may be but an indifferent discourser on the matter." He glanced at Sarah, again with a faint hint of suing for her indulgence.

She coloured a little, knowing that she gave him back his glance with interest, and then flushed a shade more.

"I know—I know," she said, with some eagerness. "I was once in a storm on the sea. I wasn't afraid, though not possessing any more than average courage; but I was simply intoxicated. It was wildly beautiful; I discovered afterwards that everybody else had been expecting death, but I didn't remember the risks. How it tore in the rigging! It was but a ketch, you know, and every rag of sail went and we heeled over so that I hung on to the bottom of a broken mast, and Jim, my brother, clung on to me to keep me from being washed overboard. I wouldn't go below—with the herrings, I said. They took it for unseasonable levity—I'm afraid it was, too."

"How horrible!" exclaimed Enid Mary.

Mrs. Vaughan looked vaguely astonished.

Ackworth gazed at the speaker with smiling lips, his eyes seeming to reflect her eagerness. "You are an experience ahead of me," he said, and laughed. "I've never been shipwrecked. But I shall be able to compare notes with you when we get *weather* here."

"I believe it is positively music to Henry to hear the sea-birds crying, presaging storm," remarked Enid Mary. "He gets out his storm coat and his sou'-wester, and his sea boots, and it's more than Jane Ann's life is worth to neglect those same sea-boots—they're fed on periodical doses of some odious oil."

Henry smiled, surveying her tolerantly. Her cheeks had a delicate rose flush upon them, her eyes were very bright, her desire to defend her own standard against the scoffer had lent animation to her manner; she *felt* also that she was looking her best; there were touches of palest pink to relieve the whiteness of her dress, and so each contributory aid made her for the time being more exceedingly beautiful than usual. With her whole soul in a glance she challenged her cousin, defying him with her beauty, outshining herself. But for her pains his eyes lost their seeing look even as they were fixed upon her; he seemed wandering in search of a thought, which, when found, he promptly turned and offered to Sarah.

"I shall want you to tell me what you think after you have seen a bog in winter dress of stained rushes," he said, with thoughtful deliberation.

Enid turned her head and stared from the window, infinite disgust upon her features. Her mother, carefully repairing a rent in one of Henry's coats, lifted her eyes from time to time to scan their new neighbour, noting Henry's interest in her, and the quick sympathy in their tastes.

Henry was a connection of Mrs. Vaughan's by marriage. His father, Henry the elder, had taken a tour in remote Wales after leaving college and before settling down to any profession; he was gathering material to support some theory of his own upon the ancient Celt; but as is the way of mundane happenings he lost his interest for the nonce in the vagaries of the collective Celt, by becoming immersed in the individual charms of Miss Mary Vaughan, daughter of a recluse clergyman. The young lady herself had never left her native hills, and only the

calling of greater love was magnet enough to draw her from her beloved solitudes; there was always reason to doubt her fondness for the ways of the big world. Her only child, Henry, was brought up in an atmosphere that smacked of hill winds, reeked with the peaty odour of cottage interiors, and was golden with the glamour of her fond memories. The boy grew up in a world that had no reality in his environment, but to his temperament the unreal was the actual, the actual but a shell in which his body was imprisoned. He made annual pilgrimages with his mother to his grandfather's seclusion, and from earliest days his imagination was fired with the desire to follow in the old man's footsteps. Naturally, his father had larger ambitions for an only son, and though no persuasion prevailed to keep the lad from working to enter the Church, the elder yet persevered in his attempts to make his son take a wider outlook, to see there was no career for a man of ability in burying himself in some remote corner of a desolate country. Death, however, removed the father before the moment had arrived for the son's final decision, and so it came to pass that in the end his life-long desire was fulfilled, and he became pastor of a parish in a wild district among the Welsh hills.

It was at the elder Ackworth's house in the early days of his marriage that Mrs. Vaughan had met her own fate in "the Major," as he was usually denominated, though his commission was only in the militia. He was a Welshman, a cousin in the second or third remove to Mrs. Ackworth, strikingly handsome, and of a lively disposition. He fascinated the English girl with his attentions, made love to her with the ardency and fervour of his race, and, be-

wildered, dazzled, she found herself his wife in three months' time. He, unlike his relative, Mrs. Ackworth, openly scorned the narrow limits of country life and absolutely refused to bury his gay qualities among his native mountains. He followed his bent by playing the part of non-resident landlord, and living in London upon the variable and frequently meagre profits from a small estate. At his death when their sole child, Enid, was eighteen, Mrs. Vaughan was only too glad to accept Henry's invitation to go to Blaenafon vicarage and keep house for him. The exact relationship that existed between Henry and herself was not very clearly defined, but he had been taught as a child to call her "aunt," and in that sense Enid counted as a sort of cousin.

CHAPTER VII.

"My Dear Jim,—

"I count it an aggravating deficiency on your part, that you must needs be so devoted to work that 'you cannot see your way' to coming here for the summer. I'm growing fast into an enthusiast about the country; it's so strikingly different from anything I have known intimately hitherto. At first sight it is bare to desolation—the gaunt ribs of the earth sticking through the ragged garment of starved vegetation; but second sight brings to the fore a most wonderful charm, a breath, a presence, hard to define, yet most potently active upon one's sensations.

"I had an experience three days ago. I was out in a storm. Having wandered rather a long way from home, and the weather changing with most astonishing rapidity, I had to make what shift I could for shelter among some boulders. But I was glad I was caught; I can never describe the exhilaration of being out in such a fury of the elements, alone, with never a house nearer than a mile. The sea horizon was a thick gloom of the texture of carded wool, with lurid effects in chastened gold as gleams

from the hidden sun shot athwart the umbrous vapours. Southward, the cloud mountains rose with flame-rimmed edges, and the serpent fire sprang from base to summit, rending the great curtain as the veil of the temple must have been rent. The wind rose far away and came on stealthily, its first whispers seemed as if they could never reach the hill-top where I stood, and yet in less than five minutes I was crouching beside a boulder to save myself being blown off my feet. Then the rain came—sheets of it, slanting across the land like a pent-roof, massed javelins launched from the sky, and pitting the earth with their points. The thunder reverberated magnificently from hill-top to hill-top, echoing again and again until a fresh peal roared forth and swallowed the lesser clamours. A fire ran in one's nerves. I met Mr. Ackworth the next day, and as he had also been caught in the storm, we had experiences to compare——"

Sarah laid down her pen, and leaned her head upon her hand, staring at the paper and the written words. She had met Ackworth on the road the day after the storm; and he had related his experience and she had listened and then told her own little tale, and each had passed on. It had been quite simple, and yet the savour of those few minutes lingered with singular fragrance in her memory. She had found herself reviewing the scene a score of times, remembering with striking exactness his words and the manner of his utterance, and the indefinable atmosphere of the man. There was a certain richness in his fervours that was new in her experience, a glow in his imaging of an event that was readily communicated to his hearer; it gave her the sensation

of attack, stirred her to answering fervours, equal powers of imaging; struck subtle chords of response in her; made any given moment exquisitely memorable—a point in time to be dwelt upon, retasted, analysed, preserved, because in some inscrutable fashion it was precious as visions seen in sleep. Life had not hitherto brought her pleasure in this particular guise.

She got up suddenly, leaving the unfinished letter upon the writing-table, and strolled out of the room and thence into the open air. She wandered downwards to the gate and stood there "listening to the silence" as children say, when they have passed from uproar to perfect quietude. June had come, and June among the hills has peculiar splendours. On brilliant days Sarah tried to reach that subtle point of appreciation which is simple joy, closely allied, as it seems, with those forces in nature that make the lark's song a delirium, an ecstasy, and the colour of a bog-flower a bewitching surprise, a thing wholly apart from grandiose admiration.

An old woman passed carrying a big bag of wool upon her shoulders. She glanced up with a bright eye, and Sarah, only too anxious to air the one or two phrases she had acquired, at once gave her the customary salutation—"How are you to-day?"

The bag of wool was incontinently slipped to the ground, and a smiling face uplifted itself in smiling reply. "Very good, very good indeed! How are you? Do you like this country?" all given in rapid vernacular, which utterly bewildered the new resident. She nodded and smiled, racked her brain for a sentence to express her sentiments of the moment, failed, and had to fall to nodding and smiling again as

the old woman set out on a lengthy discourse upon a matter of apparent interest, pointing, gesticulating.

At her wits' end, in despair of getting out of this difficulty with grace, Sarah glanced along the road to see Ackworth approaching. She could not repress a sigh of relief. For, oddly enough, she had already caught the spirit of place enough to shrink instinctively from seeming other than the very good comrade of all and sundry, in so far as in her lay.

"I am so glad to see you," she said as he drew near, her eagerness of manner rather confusing her as she recognised it. "I have involved myself in technical troubles through being too daring. An airing of one of my half-dozen phrases has brought upon me a conversation I am totally unable to comprehend."

He smiled, as he touched his hat with simple courtesy, lacking all ceremoniousness.

"Well, Siani—are you teaching Miss Garland to speak Welsh?"

"No, indeed, sir. I think she could teach me—the way she said the words to me," was the ready reply, suave, even polished in its inherent power of suggesting flattery to the newcomer.

"So good as that!"

"Indeed—wonderful—so plain as I can say the words myself."

"She compliments you on your pronunciation," he said, looking to Sarah.

He poked the bag that rested on the ground. "Wool?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Is it a gown for you, then, next winter?"

"No, sir. A coat for Daniel."

"I suppose you know they wear clothes from the wool of their own sheep," he said, turning from Siani.

"I did hear of it," Sarah replied.

Siani, with instinctive breeding, took up her bag; the vicar helped her to get it comfortably placed upon her shoulder, and she went on her way, with much good-natured nodding and smiling.

"You have pleased her amazingly," said Henry, as they watched the old woman plod onward.

"How did I manage it?"

"By speaking to her in her own language."

"But I only got out one sentence; and then she poured forth such a stream as completely silenced me. I was in despair until I saw you coming."

"No matter—you did your best—the whole neighbourhood will feel complimented when she has related her experiences."

Sarah smiled, and then both turned and stared at the opposite slope beyond the river, where a field of dark rye grass bent and billowed as the breeze swept over it. There seemed some fascination in its ceaseless movement, for she did not remove her eyes as she spoke again, nor he as he replied.

"Are they so sensitive?" she asked.

"Quite," he returned. "And prouder of their language than an English person, with, pardon me, the arrogance of the conquering race, can estimate. They, you know, feel still that pang."

"Pang?" she repeated. "I don't understand."

"They feel that they are the beaten race."

"These people, to-day?"

"Yes, to-day. And it is precisely these people who are capable of maintaining the attitude—tradition has done it, the tale has come down from

one generation to another, through the centuries, and is far more real to them than the happenings recorded in the daily paper to the average reader."

She was still looking at the rye grass, narrowing her eyes a little, scanning the idea closely.

"One almost catches it," she remarked at length. "It's rather splendid, isn't it?—holding an attitude through the centuries."

"It's an inheritance little in keeping with modern ways." Suddenly with a touch of raillery, he turned upon her. "But you are an Englishwoman, you belong to the conquering tribe; you must despise the sentiment."

She moved her head round quickly. "Not if I understood it."

"Ah!" He looked to the ground, figuring in the thin dust with the point of his stick. "That certainly makes all the difference. We so rarely stay for that—to understand. We generally scoff at a thing out of hand."

"Personally, that's not my way," she returned, thoughtfully staring at the triangle he had outlined on the ground.

He lifted his head and gazed to the farthest hill-top lining the sky with serrated edge, and to the patch of moorland sloping away from it, which, even in the glare of a June day, was sombre in colouring, a medley of russet shades, touched in high lights with chastened gold.

"This is the country of the imagination," he said, at last, seeming to have traversed an age of thought since she spoke. "Even the poorest has his share—I mean the poorest in intellect, of course, for worldly values have little to do with it."

She did not speak, but kept her eyes fixed on his triangle in the dust.

"We are emotional, too," he said, after a pause, breaking in on her reverie. "We lack balance. We're on the heights or in the depths—and for equally slight reason, very often. The splendours of the imaginative temperament may rise to grandeur, but its feebler side runs too frequently to the mawkish."

She turned to him with surprise. "It sounds as if you were another person talking," she said, bluntly.

He laughed quickly. "I am two men, you know," he cried gaily, "and that was the Englishman who spoke then; he corrects the Welshman very often."

"I forget that you are Welsh," she said, simply.

Just then a figure appeared on the opposite slope, striding along a path winding among the rye grass.

"Ah, who is that?" she asked. "I have seen him before."

He glanced upwards. "Oh, that is Eben Lloyd, rather a close friend of mine."

It was a young farmer she had seen on one of the early days in Blaenafon. She had met him on the road once or twice since, and he had accosted her each time with the same studied politeness, speaking in English.

"Then does that account for his knowledge of English—I mean his accent, which is good."

"Most likely. He is studying for the Church."

She turned in amaze.

"You are surprised? My maternal grandfather was a weaver's son. And one of the delights of my youthful visits to him was to hear stories of the old dark times, when he was a lad helping his father in

his trade during the day and studying at night by the light of the glowing peats, for there was but one thin home-made candle for the whole family's use, and it must be carried wheresoever it might be needed for the moment—it could not be spared for the sole convenience of the scholar. He died a Canon."

She was watching the lithe figure of the young man descending the opposite slope towards the river. "And is it possible that he, too, may become a church dignitary?"

"It is not impossible. Are you not a little disgusted?" he asked with a touch of playfulness.

"No, but I am astonished—and very respectful."

The young fellow arrived on the road, doffed his cap politely, and passed on. Sarah bowed.

"I understand his superior manners now," she said.

Henry smiled into her face. "Then you are of my own opinion; but when Eben comes to the vicarage for any little assistance I can give him in his studies, my cousin, Enid Mary, only sees the size of the nails in his boots. Of course," he added, laughing, "it is natural feminine anxiety on the score of carpets."

The little smile that played round Sarah's mouth rather puzzled him. After a moment's pause, he said: "If you will excuse me I will catch Eben up before he gets too far ahead, because I think he wants to see me. Good-bye."

He went so quickly, the departure almost lacked courtesy. She turned abruptly, cast no backward glance, and climbed slowly towards the house, counting the steps as she touched them with her feet—one, two, three, four, five, then a little platform and one,

two, three, four, five again. She hadn't noticed before how many went to the making of the ascent; it was like a journey upstairs.

She dropped into the chair she had left half-an-hour earlier, and stared at the unfinished letter to Jim. She picked up the pen and played a tattoo on the table.

CHAPTER VIII.

ON the mountain the warmth of summer comes tardily, and consequently the crops ripen late—the hay harvest lingers into August, not infrequently into September; in particularly bad seasons, it is no unusual phenomenon for remnants of stained hay to lie awaiting its home-carrying while the corn is falling under the scythe over the fence.

Eben Lloyd, a lithe figure, six feet two in his stocking feet, attired in washed corduroys, an unbuttoned waistcoat, and a battered wide-brimmed hat, swung the scythe rhythmically. His face was somewhat of a contrast to his personal trappings and occupation, though indisputably the countenance of a mountain man, with the dream air upon it, the stamp of solitude, and the strong nervous lines that told of endless toils under adverse circumstances, dumb struggles against the odds of weather and greater odds of material and spiritual lacks. On features of rudest chisellings these hall-marks of the mountain are indelibly scarred, and for the rest there are the ox eyes with the ox gaze, the unshapely physique, attuned on the bias, equipped by Nature's subtleties to its environment. But Eben stopped short of these

neighbourly characteristics at some vague point where the mind and the man interchange places in the ruling of character; he had the scholar's air, despite corduroys many times washed, a hat with a flapping brim, an open waistcoat that left the coarse grey flannel shirt on view. His body moved as if to music; no dancer tripping to the measured strains of melody swept with nicer precision nor truer grace. It was a movement of three—one, two, three, the hiss of the first cut, the cadence of its ending, and the backward sweep to the beginning again. The grass blades fall with the air of defeat, and lie in ordered ranks perfuming the atmosphere with their life moisture—the wine of the sun and the wind that they have stored and filtered with unfaltering alchemy to nourish the seed germs and lift them from tender shoots to tall and fruitful stems.

Eben's lips moved at intervals. It was his habit to bring in his memory some passage from his studies, and con it as he went through the routine of the day's farming labours. To-day he murmured:—

> "Pastor cum traheret per freta navibus
> Idaeis Helenam perfidus hospitam;
> Ingrato celeres obruit otio
> Ventos, ut caneret fera
> Nereus fata."

He paused in his work, straightened his shoulders, and looked abroad, muttering the first couplet again, and then again. His mind ran on the words till he drew his brows together and narrowed his eyes, peering through the sunlight, a half smile on his lips. Helen! The story of that ravishment always pleased him mightily, and his heart was ever with the

robber. It was the glory of the woman that had tempted the man, and that claiming of the woman against fearful odds was in truest keeping with the mountain man's sense of romance. He had read the story of Helen a hundred times, and always with new delight; it touched vital passion, the chord of sympathy vibrated, and Eben's soul was afire. *He* knew how the man felt who took the woman—removed from him by ties too strong to be broken—who daring, had dared all. Eben stared out across the rolling sun-steeped landscape, crying in his heart, "Helen! Helen!"

His dark eyes lit up with subtle fires; the serenity of the scholar slipped from his countenance, revealing another and a fiercer man as he gazed to the far verge of his moment's view—the roof of the little church. Out of sight, in shelter of a hill was the parsonage. "Helen! Helen!" cried his imagination again. His thoughts were with the most beautiful woman on earth; until she had appeared in his world he had not known what the old poets meant by their eulogies of womenkind; but now, since she had come to Blaenafon he knew the whole agony and pain, the gladness and the despairs, the desires and the defeats, and the humblings. And he welcomed them all. For he who has not loved has not lived. The very anguish of despair had a greatness that enfeebled even the joys of common things. It had made him a king among men; it was royal to love; it was noble to suffer; he was lifted to the very empyrean in moments of exalted dreaming of his beloved, picturing her splendours, imaging every grace, pondering each charm of gesture and presence. At night, under the stars, tramping the fields he tilled by day, too restless

for even his beloved books to charm, his life throbbed at such high pressure that he was afraid, trembled in the might of an ecstasy that seemed too great for mortal endurance. Those were the times of wild unrestraint; in the sunlight nature tuned him to saner joys, and he likened her ever and again to the greatest beauty the world had ever known, dwelt on the privilege of seeing her, hearing her speak, living for a few moments under the glancing of her dark eyes.

"Helen! Helen!" his heart cried again as he bent to the triple movement of the scythe. He had never dared to utter her name with his lips, though he thought it the most musical that tongue could frame —Enid Mary. It pleased him immeasurably that she was of his race and nation, that her very magnificence was of the type of his own people; she was his kinswoman so far, both his blood and hers had been cradled among the hills from all generations.

Again he stood upright, letting his whole being play upon the one thought of thoughts—his love, and the object of it. He stared through the sunlit air, a solitary figure, pulses throbbing to the world-old rhythm, brain teeming with all a Celt's imaging of his love's perfections.

Afar on a link of road a dark cavalcade appeared, and Eben watched it with unseeing eyes until it drew near enough to disclose a woman's white hat. He gazed fixedly, and made out four ponies and riders. They were ambling irregularly along, sometimes three abreast, or again in single file, as the breadth of the path permitted. Eben leaned on his scythe.

On they came; now he lost them in a dipping of

the way, now they were poised in dazzling sunlight; then the ponies broke into a trot; and fell to ambling again when the track became too rough. Up and up, they mounted by slow degrees to the plateau where Eben stood awaiting their arrival.

Ackworth rode first as they came near.

"Good-morning, Eben," he called. "We're off to the lake to fish. What do you say to our chances of luck?"

Miss Garland smiled and nodded, Mrs. Vaughan said "How'd you do, Eben?" Enid Mary stared at him with sober unconcern. He gave her one flashing glance, and answered questions.

He said he didn't think there would be much fishing before sundown.

The lake lay in a cup of hills, and it was shaped roughly like a harp, so that the rolling land about it made the carving of its frame. An eighth of its surface was brown with water-lily pads, now starred with the thick white blossoms—ivory chalices filled with the ichor flowing from their golden hearts. A ripple ran over the water, swift, light as the rumplings of a woman's garments, and then the green-brown leaves rocked their fairy craft of buds, tipping them to drink the sunbeams.

The clustering hills were daintily green, stained here and there with the deeper tinge of the bog's colouring; grey stone walls climbed the headlands and dropped to the water's edge, dividing one squatter's claim from another; sheep browsed on the scant herbage; a long-tailed pony stood with fore-hoofs among the wet reeds, dipping its head to drink; and cattle—mountain cattle, lean, rough, weather-

beaten, immersed to mid-leg, chewed the cud, tails lazily whisking the water flies. A sea-bird flew over, reflecting snowy plumage in the lake, and the lapwings rose from the bog land with their human cries. From a homestead hidden behind the hill came three pigs, grunting, querulous with curiosity; a dog's bark sounded far away; one of the cows lowed at intervals, the pony whinnied at length and sped wildly in search of a lost companion.

"Isn't it desolate?" Enid Mary twitched her nose, and dropped on the grass.

They lunched at high noon. Gradually the little breeze had died away and the lake was a blue-brown looking-glass, mirroring the very flies that skimmed over its surface. In the middle of the meal a woman, short-skirted, wearing the customary clogs, appeared high on the hill above their heads. She stared and smiled, and then disappeared. And they had forgotten her, when she hove in sight once more, and came towards them, hiding something in her apron. Nearer and nearer, and her smile grew broader and broader, until she stood a yard from the group, appealing with big kindly eyes for their indulgence.

"How are you to-day?" said Ackworth.

Her soul leapt to her eyes; she sprang to his side, dropping to one knee, and laid a timid hand upon his sleeve, stretching the other holding a bottle of milk. "For the ladies' tea," she said prettily and courteously.

He accepted the milk with charming friendliness, handed it to Mrs. Vaughan that she might pour it into one of their own vessels, and then was himself proceeding to the water's edge to wash the bottle when the donor caught him by the sleeve with big gestures of dissent and reclaimed her property forth-

with. But she seemed loth to go; and Sarah, quick to detain her and please her, caught up the plate of sandwiches in one hand and a dish of cakes in the other, inviting her by gesture to help herself. She drew back shyly, but further pressure induced her to take one from each plate; and she folded them carefully in the corner of her apron, and chattered volubly ere she finally departed.

After lunch, Enid, Sarah and Ackworth put their tackle in trim and wandered on the lake's edge for an hour, but nobody had so much as a rise. They laid their rods aside, and rejoined Mrs. Vaughan, who was reading.

Everybody had brought a book to while away the waiting hours, and for a short time all seemed absorbed in their own particular volume. Enid glanced up first and saw that Sarah was staring at the water, and turning her eyes towards Ackworth discovered him to be observing Sarah. She began to talk at once, her manner restless, and the others gave her grudging attention as if they had rather be undisturbed in their several musings.

"Wouldn't it be better *on* the water than just staring at it?" she said. "This is so dull."

"Do you think so?" said Sarah.

"You're asleep, aren't you, Henry?"

He smiled in response.

"None of our books seems interesting—except mother's."

Both Ackworth and Sarah began ostensibly to read again, and Enid perforce must follow their example. But once more stealing a side glance from the page, she found Sarah had returned to water-gazing and Ackworth to a study of the gazer. She watched them,

surreptitiously, looking back to her book instantly if either gave any sign of noticing her.

Through the deep stillness of the afternoon nobody spoke, and the silence took on the quality of an enveloping presence, touching Enid with vague sadness, making her sense of desolation acute. At intervals a lapwing cried or a crow cawed and flapped lazily overhead; gorgeous, long-bodied, gossamer-winged flies darted through the crystalline air; the lake mirrored a perfect sky without a wisp of cloud to mar its radiance; afar, building horizons in tiers against the hazy blue of distance, ran the mountains, draped in uniform veil of palest turquoise tint.

Mrs. Vaughan came at length to the end of her story, closed the book and glanced round.

"I suppose a cup of tea will be the next thing," she said, breaking the spell.

Two out of three of the young people turned to her with almost reproachful mien. But Enid sighed and stood up and went to the water's edge and stared down at the reflection of herself in the placid surface.

After tea they got to work again with the rod, and hoped a little wind would rise to ripple the water as the sun sank.

A small stream ran out of the lower end of the lake, and when Ackworth came to its verge he leapt to the other bank and proceeded slowly onward, casting his line. Five minutes later Sarah reached the same spot and followed his example—her short tweed skirt being no impediment to her agility. But Enid knew she dare not venture the feat; she had a trailing frock on which necessitated the sole use of one hand to keep it from contact with the wet ground —she had the gift of wearing the wrong clothes for

a special occasion. So perforce she must wander up and down, and see the others on the opposite side trying fresh water. The top end of the lake was impassable because it was a marsh.

The lake in its cup of hills lost the sun long before the open country beyond, and as soon as its bright head had slipped behind the tallest western headland, chill airs gathered above the hollow, and a white film appeared above the lily pads. Mrs. Vaughan began to make preparations for departure, and Enid went to fetch the warm coat each had brought in readiness for the evening treachery of the climate. And even as she was donning it, there came over the hills a soft thick fleece of greyish white mist, creeping slowly, descending to the water's surface in coils and wreaths, moving as steam plays over a boiling fluid. It thickened rapidly, mass following mass with startling speed, so that in five minutes a high impenetrable wall of impalpable texture stood between Enid and her companions on the other side of the lake. Henry and Sarah had vanished from sight as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed them.

When the mist came down Sarah was intent upon getting her first trout to land; and Ackworth was similarly engaged. On their side of the water, for no apparent reason, the surface for a hundred yards from shore began suddenly to boil with the rising fish; plop, plop, plop, came the sound on every hand. This phenomenon would be of short duration, Henry knew, and so he took scant heed of the descending cloud, and cast again and again successfully. As soon as the troubling of the water ceased he would go after the others and make all haste home.

With sportsman's ardour he worked with a will, utterly regardless that he could not see more than a yard to right or left, forward or rearward; he was standing in a wet hollow in lee of some boulders that rose rampart-wise behind him. The "sing" of his line as it swept through the air cut sharply into the muffled stillness. Then suddenly there was a little cry, and somewhere in the dimness behind the boulders his line had caught. He dropped his rod, and began to climb the rocks hastily as the nearest route to the end of the line whence the cry had come. The hill rose, and the monster stones lay as it were clutching its side. Beyond the outermost one he came at length upon Sarah, dabbing her handkerchief against her cheek where a little trickle of blood ran down. He made it all out as he sprang from the last stone to her side.

"Miss Garland—what have I done?"

"Got caught in a snag," she replied, with playful intent, pointing to the hook in her cheek.

He stared, wrinkles forming in his forehead and lines of anxiety cutting into the smoothness of his face. "What have I done?" he repeated.

"I was trying to join you," she explained. "I felt rather at sea. I lost sight of you the other side of these boulders, and as I remembered it was simply pools to wade through at the water's edge, I climbed the hill a little to skirt the stones—then—your line came whizzing through the air."

He dropped on the stone at her side.

"And here I am—snared with a March Brown," she added, when he did not speak.

"What can I do?" he asked helplessly.

"Try and get it out, please," she answered.

"But——" he began.

She held her cheek towards him. "It's got to be done," she said.

"It will be so painful——"

"That will have to be endured. Don't remember about it." She held her cheek closer. "Best to have it over quickly."

Instinctively he shrank.

"It's rather a difficult matter to do one's self," she said.

"It is impossible," he exclaimed, lifting his hand, then dropping it again. "But I'm a coward——"

She dabbed at the little trickle of blood again. "Please—it's rather painful now," she urged.

And as he raised his hand again, resolute at last, a sense of her nearness came over him strangely.

"I don't believe I *can* do it," he said simply, her proximity confusing him queerly.

"But it's got to come out," she answered. "Just a little wrench, you know, and it will be over—I am so sorry to give you trouble. Think of the fish." She tried to laugh, but the movement twitched the cheek, and she winced slightly.

"They are cold-blooded, I am not," he replied, with a touch of rue in his manner that made her try to smile again, but he only caught it in the eyes.

Once more he lifted his hand. "It will hurt you —inevitably." Again the sense of her closeness swam over him.

"Look here," she said with quick practicality, "I'll put my finger inside my cheek and press outwards—that will numb it a little and also hold it firmer for you to operate."

He stood up, bending over her. Her hair lay in

slight disorder on her temples, and the little points of moisture had decked each fine strand with myriad silver beads. Her cheek was cool and silken as a rose-leaf. "I can't torture you," he said, suddenly.

"You won't," she replied. "Just a snatch—the bit of flesh will have to tear."

The hook was embedded fully in the centre of the cheek. He drew back yet again.

Then she did a queer thing. She took his hand by the wrist and guided it to the place. And he was suddenly ashamed, and put both hands to the task, and deliberately, coolly, with the deft touch of the accustomed fisherman extricated the small barb. But as soon as it was out he put his hand over the ragged little wound, and felt the warm blood trickle against his palm. He looked into her eyes, his own filled with pain.

"Forgive me," he said, "but I'm feeling the smart for you," and still searched her eyes.

"I'll bathe it now, please," she said, quietly, and stood up.

But he was gone instantly, climbing over the boulders, and she sank back into her seat and waited, drumming on the turf with her foot, feeling the sting of the throbbing wound, and struggling with yet another throbbing that fell to a dull aching as he came to her side again with his hat full of water.

"Thank you," she said, but her hands trembled as she dipped her handkerchief in the water.

"May I not do it?" he asked, and she agreed with a nervous laugh.

Neither spoke. He thought he had been gently touching that silken cheek through a troubled life-

time, when a sound came to his ears. It was the tread of feet; he listened—it was not an animal's step; and then a voice called "Hallo, there!"

Ackworth replied, and then in a minute through the tangled skeins of the vapour Eben Lloyd appeared.

"As I had not seen you go by," he said, "I thought you might want help in catching the ponies, now the mist has come down."

CHAPTER IX.

"BUT unto us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God."

Henry Ackworth stood upright, repeating the words without looking at the open Testament on the board before him. His eyes roamed over the congregation. His surpliced figure, erect, unmoving, silent for a moment after delivering his text, gave the note of his present mood. The conventional air which everyday costume gives, left him when he donned canonicals; then he became the teacher in every detail, with touches of the prophet when impassioned utterances fell from his lips. His discourses were prepared with the sole aim of reaching the minds of his simple hearers, of touching their consciousness, and tuning them to a conception, however faint, of things higher and of greater import than mere mundane matters. It was his aim to be sincere, and sometimes he plodded doggedly through the thesis as laid out in his mind beforehand; but at others, and these were the occasions when his hearers were most fascinated with their pastor, when they hung breathless upon every word falling from his lips,

he let a certain ardour of intellect rule and guide him, words flowed as a stream, the subtleties of thought played and inter-played in mazes of fancy, latent fires leapt into flame, and his own eloquence amazed him. Not that the effort was a matter of words merely, or even of utterance, but of his personality; the man himself at these times seemed reflected in the very outpouring of speech. And though the sequence of his phrases was high above the heads of these simple mountain folk, yet in their own nature was the answering fire that responded to the rhythm and melody of language. He electrified them; the music of the tongue captivated himself as he heard it, there were whole passages that rolled as organ notes on quiet air, then tender pipings that gave the idea of hill wind through the reeds. When he stood there before his simple flock in the old worm-eaten pulpit he was master of the ancient art of their people—and his.

"He is a bard," they murmured to each other as they straggled over the fields to their homes.

As Ackworth glanced round upon his congregation after delivering his text his eye fell upon Sarah Garland sitting in a back seat. His mood was restive. He had a sheet of paper in his pocket, with three or four jottings upon it; memoranda of the divisions and trend of his discourse. He had planned a neat little epitome of the obvious teachings of the text; but instead of that simple discourse there was teeming in his head an altogether different rendering—such as he might have laid out for a cultivated audience. In that casting of the eyes over the people there was the little combat between inclination and rigid discipline—he was not here to air his rhetoric,

but to teach these undeveloped souls——. A veritable thrill of repulsion ran through him, and at that instant his gaze alighted on Sarah. The fight was over instantly.

"'Yea, the deep things of God.'" He repeated the words in another voice. There was visible stir among the people—they knew the vicar was going to delight them this morning rather than teach them.

He felt that after all the text had a right to have its way with him; he had not sought it; it had come to him in that inexplicable fashion in which vagrant sentences alight in the mind—"the deep things of God." There was splendour in the rendering of the idea. "The Spirit searcheth all things," he hung on the words as a musician lingers on phrases of a composition.

It was a golden September day; every valley was a pool of sunlight, every summit crowned with radiance. There was glamour on each leaf and grass blade; a slope, patched with gorse, its little lamps alight, glowed with actual warmth of colour, and when there was a cushion of purple heather and a bunch of blue bells intermingled, it became one of Nature's choicest colour schemes. A breathing silence lay upon the land, that poignant Sabbath peace that rests alike on crowded city or desolate moorland. If she sat sideways Sarah could see through the open door to the far mountains filmed in a robe of turquoise tint. The whole seemed in keeping—Ackworth's face slowly assuming that tense inward expression, the waiting folk in their homespun clothes, and the far-off hills swathed in their wonder-garment of blue distance.

Sarah heard him with downcast eyes for awhile,

then looked up to catch the pose of him as he spoke. She could only understand isolated words, phrases, sentences, but these pieced together gave her the key to his theme. She looked down again, and soon the effort of brain to catch the meaning of his words ceased before an onrush of pure feeling. She had experienced it before in greater or less degree; though the less was steadily being superseded by the greater. Again and again she looked up and again looked down. It had become a habit with her in these times of attending public worship, to stand as it were apart from the man as she knew him in ordinary intercourse, to pass him in review as she might any other of her kind, to analyse her own attitude towards him. She wanted to be quite sure about several things—if it were reason enough for her interest in him that he was the only man of any culture whom she now met, whether he was as a new book—such a dear delight in the first ardours of possessing and reading, or whether a year to-day he would seem a commonplace personality. She held herself in this critical attitude by masterly effort, as one who essays a bodily feat, breathless, a little fearful of defeat, resolute to conquer.

He had a musical voice. As the first words of his sermon ran through the sunlit air carrying she knew not what of potent personality she was conscious of a sinking of heart, a quiver of emotion, and also, far and away, distant as were the blue hills, a joy all-abounding, all-embracing; as if, long standing at the door of a new world, she had at length entered, by no will of her own, drawn within by irresistible magnetism.

Ackworth had the academic manner; he should have delivered abstruse discourses to the learned and

casuistical, instead of pointing out the homely road to that very homely heaven of the unlearned and simple. He had planned quite a pretty allegory to illustrate "the deep things of God," to his flock; but now his imagery, fancy, subtleties of metaphysics rode over their heads in a ready flow of words that thrilled them emotionally by their very magic of melody, but could not touch their understandings. In a flash of side thought he saw the anomaly of it all—to those who knew the language he was using, he spoke an unknown tongue, to the one in the congregation whose ears were unopened to the meaning of it he was speaking with an eloquence that caught instant response. He divined it by every gesture as she raised her head or lowered it, or gazed through the open door, or lifted eyes to his that had no outer seeing in them. And still the studied course of the oration swept on, not a flaw in the deliverance, not one hesitancy for thought or symbol, but the measured accents of the scholar, the man of intimate knowledge of "the deep things of God." To himself it was a revelation, opening he knew not what vistas to his entranced gaze, and there was nothing of profanity in his outpouring of fervour with a passage of Holy Writ as text. It was indeed to him one of the "deep things of God" that another being should enter his life by this royal road of his innermost heart. He played with words, dropping them about her as it were, weaving a veil of his eloquence to invest her with the very garment of his love.

The September sunlight swam over the heads of the people and made patches of pure gold on the dark oaken pews, illumining the dimness of the pe:.':ed cobwebbed ceiling with a pale gloom, slanting

a shaft of radiance across the little chancel, staining the ruby cloth of the communion table. Through the windows Ackworth too saw the distant hills and the dimpling valleys; the standing corn, shock leaning against shock—that unique touch of pastoral picturesqueness; the hedgerows tinging to russet, with here and there a trail of flame where the bramble threaded its crimson and chaste gold, its yellow of primrose and flush of rose. The sound of the baaing sheep came in at the open door, and among the wild flowers on the graves bees hummed and buzzed. Sarah lifted her eyes to Henry Ackworth's face and did not look down any more. That which she had combatted had won its way, and though she was vanquished utterly, the knowledge of defeat mingled bewilderingly in the chaos of sensation. As the man in the pulpit preached to the woman, so the woman received, she gave him what he had not to give her and in like manner accepted; the one is not whole without the other. "The Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God." He concluded with the words. He had been preaching forty minutes.

And when he had gone to the vestry, and the door was shut, and he was alone, he stood listening to the passing tread of the dispersing congregation. She would pass, too, and in fancy he saw her figure as it went along the sunlit road, her head a little bent, and she would be reading in the dust.

The last step faded farther and farther away; silence shut him in. He stood with hands clasped behind him, eyes on the floor. The silence grew deeper, a thing that wrapped him in its mantle, so that he heard only inner voices, the sounds that are not communicated by the medium of the outer ear.

He was a man who had that day entered into his patrimony, the heritage of his manhood. He had truly sensed one of the "deep things of God." It was as if he dwelt in light and the light was but the expression of himself. His nerves were steady, his brain ordered and obedient to his will; he felt his strength as the strength of ten men. For awhile the image of her through whom this new living had come to him, was blurred; in its first true realisation love is ever apart from the beloved; always love for love's sake. The commingled blood in his veins, that of the Celt and the Teuton, made magic war against each other; the Welshman was uplifted as with song, every thought was aflame with light; but the Teuton was more subtle, something statelier moved him to ecstasy, his grandeurs had more substance, less glamour, greater reality. He smiled as if he recognised the warfare, and knew the battle would be to the strong. But the nature of the battle had not yet entered his understanding.

In the afternoon Sarah went up to the mountain, climbing to the highest point in the district, and sat down with her back against a boulder. She looked westwards to the sea; it was green in tender shades ranging from the tint of a translucent sunset sky to the dark shadow patches where the cloud runes were printed. Now and again in the flashing of the sunlight the white caps could be seen, sparkling facets, winking, dancing; and in the middle distance a little ship rode on the waves, a toy thing, with sails folded, masts bare, and in fancy one saw the tiny deck and the skipper with Sunday afternoon pipe, gently rocking on a Sabbath sea, awaiting Monday's tide to put

into port and unload his cargo. The gulls swept inland, their spotless bosoms dazzling in their heaving flight, lapwings rose and shrilled their plaintive cry, the sheep nibbled the short mountain turf, dotted here and there over a thousand acres of utter desolation, looking like maggots in the farther nooks and folds of the hills. A tiny black speck on a link of white road far away meant a worshipper going to afternoon meeting.

Sarah leaned against the boulder and stared out to sea. Her hands were cold and she shivered, though the sun was warm as June. She had capitulated that morning. This thing had been coming on ever since she first set foot in Blaenafon—she had no hesitancy in admitting it; it had grown in Nature's way, from the small to the greater, working through its several stages, and for a long while she was an innocent sufferer, wondering somewhat at certain pangs and tremblings; treating herself a little grimly, smiling now and then when tears threatened on account of an insistent soreness. But that period was long past, she had capitulated to her enemy—her own heart, that apparently guileless thing, and yet how it had tricked her! Pray why must it lie dormant through all the years, to start into life—*now!* The anguish stole the warm life from her blood and left her shivering and starved. In the morning through a brief half-hour there had been joy; the very power of passion rode roughshod over all dissentient conscientiousness; he spoke to her, and she gave back word for word—she knew it, and he knew it. Why had love come to her thus?—better far to have passed her forever by. Then rang out that chorus of "nays" which the heart utters when its

rights are too ruthlessly slighted. The pain had its joy, and a joy that stung more cruelly than the pain could wither. She closed her eyes and still saw the little ship riding the waves, and the skipper with his pipe on the deck, the sail lashed to yard, the yard swaying as the waves lifted her and passed, lifted her and passed, toiling to the shore—their goal, with only destiny as guide. The sea was like human things, its lot was ceaseless labour to no apparent end. She let such thoughts drift through her mind at will, and never troubled to correct the one-sidedness—the sea has its splendours and so has human life. There is a crest and a trough to every wave, and Sarah had fallen to the trough at once. Had she been less sure of herself, she might have hesitated and delayed the leap downwards; but she knew from the first instant what it all meant, where it trended. A wholly truthful nature cannot even deceive itself. She pondered with indulgent lethargy her acceptance of bondage to John Bennington, saw with sudden newborn acuteness of insight the thread of action, whence it came and whither it must lead her, discerned too, with inflooding light of vision, why Aunt Julia had left so entirely alone the education of her heart—none can teach who has not experienced. She would love Henry Ackworth through eternity—she did not pause to quibble over the details of what that meant, only recognised that the love was eternal as it was hopeless.

She sat through the livelong afternoon without stirring. She saw the tea-time smoke rising from the chimneys scattered on the slopes and in the valleys and on the plain stretching seawards. Later, as the hour for Evensong drew on, the fields and isolated

links of road became dotted with moving specks, black, crawling, like flies. At sound of the tinkling of bells her heart leapt with its first anguish of longing—Blaenafon bell was ringing, Henry Ackworth would conduct the evening service, and he would look for her, and her place would be empty. She started to her feet with the incontinent desire to run as a child might. To miss an opportunity of gazing into his face, of feeling his presence, of hearing that voice again touching her soul to its loftiest music! Tears filled her eyes as she looked across the miles dividing her from the church.

She became lost in reverie, imagining his presence, seeing the splendour of his eyes—English eyes, steadfast in spite of their occasional Celtic flashings. She yearned that he might touch her if only with his finger-tips, that she could steal from him magnetically the healing balm of his individuality. Tears rolled down her cheeks; the pain of it astonished her; could she suffer like this—and through eternity? She stood among the boulders, erect as a sapling and as pliant, fighting her first battle. Far away her figure would appear to some meditative watcher from a cottage door as a pigmy pillar.

The September sun slipped towards the horizon; the little ship still rocked upon the ocean, and for a while it lay in that golden pathway which bars the sea at sun-setting, tilting, swinging at anchor, surrounded as by broken flames as the troubled waters swelled and sank. A hush stole over the land; from the bogs a white breath rose, dank, penetrating, creeping ever upward to the hill tops. Sarah knelt upon the ground, laid her arms upon the sun-warmed stone and buried her face in the nook of her elbow.

CHAPTER X

HENRY conducted the Sunday school in the afternoon in the usual way. He got on well with children, having that happy sympathetic manner that made him their comrade and they his tried friends. It was true he gave them but few hints about the heavenward way; he made them feel so much more at ease by conversation touching everyday affairs in a spirit of gentle philosophy, so that they carried away another atmosphere, new rendering of old attitudes towards their lives, rather than definite spiritual guidance. As in so many other things pertaining to his office of priest, Henry here followed certain dominating convictions rather than canonical inference.

The sunny hour passed in the sun-mellowed church, and the urchins filed out and threaded their several ways among the graves homewards. Henry sat down again, when the last straggler had disappeared beyond the bounding hedge.

If he had been capable of remembering common events he would have recollected that at this moment Enid Mary was strolling from the house to the gate, where she would stand awaiting his arrival; after which they generally walked in the garden awhile

before the early Sunday tea. But Enid Mary was far from his mind. He looked to the spot where Sarah had sat in the morning. In the twinkling of an eye she was sitting there again, and then with the vivid dramatic power of imagination there passed in review her every glance, pose, gesture, and he experienced with minutest realistic exactitude the morning's awakening to a new life.

Half an hour passed, then another quarter. The afternoon mellowed; the gold of the sunlight on the old pews had a dusky film in it, and the stains on the walls ripened to fuller colouring. Someone came up the path towards the church, but Henry did not hear the light footfall; the figure passed in at the open door, crossing a bar of sunshine that made passing dazzle on her pale dress. He awoke slowly to the understanding of Enid Mary's words.

"I couldn't imagine where you had gone—the children went by nearly an hour ago." She scanned him with puzzled eyes, and a little frown creased the white forehead between the inky-black eyebrows.

He stood up, not resenting the intrusion in any definite thought—his mood was too self-absorbed, too individual for personal matters to enroach upon the mind's prerogative of concentration. He fetched his hat and went out, walking beside her, staring at the hill horizon where passing vapours cast shadows rich as damson bloom, protean shapes—animals couchant, pictured monstrosities.

She looked him up and down, sideways, as if he had donned fresh garments since last seen.

"Did you keep some of the children behind?" she asked.

"No," he returned.

The sound of his voice brought sudden wringing at her throat, and rising tears. He had been strangely preoccupied at dinner, and she had rallied him upon his sermon.

"Why do you bury yourself in this lost corner of the earth?" she said. "With your powers of electrifying an audience you might be a bishop, if you chose."

And he had smiled in his pleasing, tolerant way, treating her remarks indulgently, and she had smarted miserably.

They passed to the lane, and along it. She snatched at the tall grasses leaning outward from the bank fence, and robbed a tall-stemmed fox-glove of a handful of its bells. He saw her do it with an inner wince; it always stirred in him a remote idea of sacrilege to plunder Nature's stores with ruthless unconcern of their beauties and claims upon our reverence.

They came to the Vicarage gate, and he opened it for her to pass through and then followed. She halted definitely near the door to the walled garden; but unseeing he pushed on to the house, entered, and disappeared.

Still in an unbroken mood of absorption he wended his way to the church again as the bell rang musically through the mist-ridden air. Automatically he went to the vestry, donned his surplice, and at the precise moment by his watch went up to the reading desk. His eyes sought the place where Sarah was wont to sit, and it was empty.

He did not know till then that his whole being had been pulsing with expectation, that his heart was aching with its longing. The old church grew dim

about him, and he groped his way through the service as a man, thrust into sudden darkness in a familiar place, guides his movements by a remote instinct that is of none of the senses alone, yet of all of them in part.

Out in the thin soft air at last, with wreaths of mist playing hide and seek with the wayfarer, he strode towards Cae'rmynydd. At the door of the house he found Eliza. She met him with a question, "Is Miss Garland at the Vicarage, sir?"

"No."

"She went out in the afternoon and hasn't come back yet. I didn't know whether maybe she was at the Vicarage to tea."

He considered a moment, and then went away.

He turned upward to the mountain. It lay darkly above him, filmed in vapour, its contours outlined as billows against an uncertain grey that was the sky. He would find her somewhere in the mist; he was glad she was not indoors; it was so much more in keeping with the glamour of the day's revelations that they should meet under the sky, with the silent bogs stretching illimitably to night's dim horizons, the hills girdling their little world. He peered continually ahead into the gossamer web that made progress a ceaseless rending of a veil which closed again at each step. He listened for every sign and heard the barking of a dog or the far cry of a lapwing; then sound and sight became as one composite sensation and nearness was the same as distance.

He came upon her suddenly at last, at a turning of the way. The path was grass-grown at the sides, and she had been walking on the turf, and so he had not heard her foot-fall. She was moving at a

swinging pace and swept upon him out of the enveloping vapours as if she were a product of the magician's art, the outcome of the power to create the image from circumambient space.

"Ah!" he ejaculated sharply.

She stood still. And he did likewise, gazing into her face, catching its dim outline by the subdued radiance of the rising moon, filtered through the earth's mist-garment. She gave him look for look, filled with sad wonder that he should thus appear in her path; and when he spoke the ring of triumph in his voice sent a chill through her—the contrast between his joy and her woe was too great.

"I have found you," he cried, and put out his hands.

But she made no answering gesture as she said, "I have stayed out too long—but—how did you know?"

"I was looking for you—I wanted you—Eliza said you had not returned——"

"Ah, she is anxious," and she took a step forward.

He caught her hand then, detaining her. "You'll give me a few minutes—here, now?"

She looked into his face again, and the light in his eyes hurt her. "I think not—I think not," she replied hastily.

But he held her hand firmly, and stepped very near and began to talk with a fervour whose restraint was its power. "We *must* speak of this morning—though we need not put it all into so many words. You understand——" his other hand slipped round her waist.

She drew back with a little cry.

"Ah—I am too venturesome! But, dearest, love

can forgive love its too great ardours—do you not forgive me—and understand?"

She had felt strangely dull in brain and sensation as she stepped along homewards, the vigil among the boulders had seemed to exhaust the faculty of suffering for the nonce. But *now*—every pang had come back and with a hundredfold of poignancy, and the instant's touch of his arm about her waist had made her wince as if she had been one large sore wound. The cry and the start back had been involuntary. The sound of his penitent tones, the word of endearment stirred she knew not what of unforeseen anguish. She laid her hand quickly upon his arm. "How shall I tell you——?"

He covered her fingers with his own, "Let me tell you—may I not?—how love came this morning—only you know—just as I do that it must have been coming all the months since you came here—stealing a step nearer every day—until this morning—dearest, it *has* come, you would not deny it and tell me I am in a fool's dream——"

"Ah—no!" she cried, "no, but I must explain—one cannot deny what *is*——"

"That we love each other," he said softly, bending closer to her face so that he caught the trouble in her eyes, adding in other tones, "and yet you are sad——"

"Because I cannot listen to you, because I am not free to do so——"

"Not free?" he made the repetition with the insistence of stupidity.

"I am already engaged." She drew her hand from his clasp and looked away to the encircling vapours silvered with the moonbeams. The silence that

followed partook of that big quietude which reigns in desolate places, where a bird's note is as the dropping of a stone into deep waters. He had the feeling that the stillness continued her words; telling them again and again, ever more forcibly. Then came stealing that subtle undercreep of awakening pain, and human-like, he shirked instantly, and paltered with meanings to assuage its gnawing.

"I don't understand—*really*, do I? I'm getting the wrong idea—I *must* be. It's been so true, so real—all day—it can't be——"

"I will tell you the whole story—if you care to listen. It is quite simple." She did not turn as she spoke.

He looked to the ground; he was suddenly afraid to look at her.

"It happened several years ago," she went on. "You may recollect a certain case that was a great deal discussed in the papers at the time—the case of Mr. John Bennington, who was sentenced to five years' penal servitude."

Henry lifted his head.

"I am engaged to him——"

"To—to Mr. John Bennington?"

"Yes. We had been betrothed less than a month—at the time."

There was a long silence. A lapwing rose from some distant point on the bog, and came at length over their heads with only the rhythmic beating of wings to tell of its passage—an eerie experience, filling the whole neighbouring atmosphere with eddying vibrations that make a canopy of voiceless sound.

He spoke first—in the starved tones of one stul-

tified, and subtly aware of it. "But,"—then paused.

She remained silent and unmoving.

"But," he began again, "was there no word of releasing you?"

"None," she replied.

He waited then, a whole army of fears running to a head of acutest torture. Had he been an absorbed enthusiast, after all, and she in willing bondage to another all the time?

She broke the silence at last. "And as there is no likelihood that Mr. Bennington will release me, it is only wise for me to be quite emphatic."

He raised his head again, "Would you be released?"

She put up her hands with a sudden gesture and covered her face—the glistening fabric of the mist, its billowing movements, the coming and going horizons edged with the silver moonbeams, came to her eyes with a smart, and turned her brain giddy. Darkness was a rest while she steadied herself to find the needful words.

"Would you be released?" he repeated, after a while.

"I cannot be," she said at length, with evasion of the simple answer.

"But would you be?" he persisted, and took her wrists and gently drew the hands from her quivering face.

She looked into his eyes, so near her own. "There is no need to say."

"But it is good to hear!" he said on a little note of joy.

"But not for me to say—and perhaps I ought not—there are the unwritten laws."

"Ah!—but love laid them down—and where love is not, how can the laws apply?"

She pondered a moment, then, "I think not—love must be a law unto itself; it is the other that is hide bound with formulas of action—and so—I am bound."

"Then," he cried, still joyously, "*we* may be a law unto ourselves——"

"Ah—no," she interrupted. "Not to ourselves——"

"But love *is* a law unto itself—nothing can have any right compared with it."

She sighed. She was trying to get back to a certain remote mood into whose haven she had crept with infinite labouring anguish as she knelt among the boulders, with hidden face against the sun-warmed stone. It had been as the penetrating of many veils, and a moment's blissful rest, and then the veils had closed again, thick and foggy as heretofore. But the instant of rest!—she tried to realise it once more and to catch the point of view that had been the vista she had penetrated. She sighed again, conscious of failure, and a trembling feebleness that meant humiliation.

"Sha'n't we defend love's own law in ourselves?" he said.

She shook her head. "Not in ourselves."

"Then—how?"

She reflected a moment. "In love's self—isn't that it?"

"But all who love are of the body of love, and so a portion of love's self—isn't *that* it?"

"Yes——"

"Dearest, love *must* claim his rights——"

"Yes, yes. But——"

He would have drawn her closer to him, but she gently withstood his pressure.

"Perhaps," she said, with a touch of weariness in her voice, "we had better not talk any more—because it only makes everything more tangled."

"But we can straighten things—in time. Mr. Bennington, as a man of honour——" he paused, a little lamely.

"I do not think he will release me," she said.

"But you will sue for your freedom?"

After a moment's hesitancy, she replied, "I do not think I can."

"Do I understand——"

"Isn't it this way?" She put her hands behind her and stared into the mist again. "The responsibility of release must lie with Mr. Bennington——"

"And wherefore?"

"I tried to think it out this afternoon," she went on. "I must not interfere with his rights—the rights he can claim from my pledged word—do you not see?—I cannot break it without dishonour, I may only receive it back as a gift from him."

The moon was rising higher and higher, topping all but the thinnest upper layer of vapour, through which it gleamed as a silver ball.

"But you will ask him for it?"

Again a moment's hesitancy ere she answered, "Wouldn't it be too humiliating to be refused? I must think of the future and how it will have to be lived—if I begged and was denied, how would life be tolerable?"

"But you *cannot* marry—Mr. Bennington."

"I do not think I shall have any choice, because

I must not dare to assume his responsibilities or to defraud him of his generosities——"

"Oh, but are you not going too far, farther than is necessary? He could not force himself upon you—a man with a tarnished name——"

"But we should be quits if I tarnished my word, do you not understand? I—am too proud to weaken my position. If I am weighing him in the balance of a false judgment—so much the more reason that I should let him take the initiative. If I tell him the story that is tantamount to a plea for release. One must not rob a man like that of his chance to be generous, noble——"

"But will he be generous, noble?"

She sighed once more. "We can only wait and see."

"But you have no hope."

"I see his position so well," she replied, evading the crude negation, "what it will be for him to come out of prison—friendless, penniless—save for me—his relations have cast him off entirely. I think he will cling to the one spar as a drowning man must do. And one must not estimate his character at too high a level—to have fallen as he has already done, lets in so much light——"

Henry said nothing for a time, then asked, "Does Mr. Bennington communicate with you, or——"

"Never," she interrupted at once. "I have never seen him or exchanged so much as one word with him, written or otherwise, since he was arrested."

The light from the moon was growing stronger, and he could see her face more clearly, and catch gesture and attitude with added distinctness. He detected a touch of strenuousness in her manner.

"I felt from the beginning it was better so," she went on, "though I could not explain save that it seemed best, for him especially, that the question of our relation to each other should, as it were, stand void for the time being, that if it were brought up for discussion it could but go hard with him—kicking a man when he was down, you know. There would have been a hundred reasons against him—I wanted the ground to be cleared before it came up between us—and I was content to wait."

"But now—surely it is all different now."

"Yes—it is different now." Her voice sank a little.

"Is there long to wait?"

"More than a year."

"It is impossible!" he cried with sharp impatience.

"It seems so," she answered.

"It *is* so. It cannot be endured. Dearest, write to Mr. Bennington, they are permitted both to receive and to send letters at stated times, I believe."

But she took no heed.

"You will, dearest?" He stooped over her.

She lifted her head, and he saw the gleam of tears in her eyes.

"You will," he pleaded.

"Would you?" she asked.

"For your dear sake I would do anything."

"Then wait until he comes out of prison."

"But that would be for his sake, not yours."

"No," she shook her head and a teardrop fell, "it is wholly for me."

"Wholly? How can it be?"

"Shall we say no more now—and you will think about it, and then you will see I am right. It's the first boon I ask of you—because you love me."

"Ah, dearest, dearest! Because I love you—you pin me with my own weapon."

"That is best, is it not?"

He shook his head. "But if *because you love me* —you've given me permission to say it, love—if I ask a boon too, and the boon be the reversal of yours—what then?"

"You love me too well to hurt me so."

It ran in his head like wine to hear her say with simple faith in simple words the way of his love. He took her hand. "You make it more impossible for me to obey. I should be a numbskull to do your sweet bidding on such terms. I should be taking as much advantage of you—as the other man."

"I want you to take more—your claim is so much greater."

"Then the greater must prevail, and I must take precedence, and—dominate a little."

He thought she smiled slightly. "Is it not so?" he urged.

"Yes—but my way; not yours."

"Are they not identical?"

"They will be."

"But *now*. There is not a happiness which is yours and another which is mine—they are one."

"They will be," she repeated.

"Why not at this moment?" he asked.

"Because," she hesitated, and again he saw the half smile, "you are selfish and think your share should suffice for me too."

He reflected a moment. "Put it the other way—*your* share will suffice for me—amply."

"That is what I ask. Only don't let it remain mine alone—make it yours also," she answered.

He looked away, acknowledging in a dim way a new consciousness of her, suffering as it were a little shock of dismay at the subtlety of her strength and the crudeness of his feebleness. He asked and claimed the moment's joy, hungering and thirsting for the moment's consummation, the fulfilling of the law of man's self-centred nature; while she, creeping deeper and deeper into his heart of hearts, wrought in him the power to define new horizons.

But the man of the moment cried out afresh, "Dearest, a year is a long time—and no certainty at the end of it—is it not too terrible—for you as for me?"

"Yes, it's terrible," she acquiesced, wearily.

"And with no end assured," he repeated.

Again she was silent as she tried to touch once more that inner haven of the afternoon's struggle; but she only sighed at length, and said, "No, we can have no assurance."

"Then it is not to be borne," he cried. "Give me some hope."

"What if I cannot share it with you?—It will be useless."

"Dearest, you can make it of use—you can use your will and *make* things happen as mere right demands they should."

She looked into his face again; and the moonlight gleamed in his ardent eyes. "Don't you see that you will make me falter?" she said.

"Isn't it precisely what I would do?" he cried.

She shook her head.

"Dearest, I am only desiring to see you falter."

"You're not."

"Am I not?"

"It's just for your sake I'm holding on—grimly."

He gazed into her upturned face. "Am I a fool?"

"Yes," she answered.

He laughed joyously. "And you don't scoff at me?"

"No—I am too afraid."

"Afraid, dear one?"

"Yes—you may make me a fool too."

"Am I *so* strong?"

"My dear," she put her other hand into his, "you are as an army compassing me on every side. How shall I defeat you—and escape?"

"You shall not escape, and I won't be defeated." He crushed her fingers, then stooped quickly and kissed them.

He felt the thrill which ran through her at touch of his lips. "Ah, sweet love, I *can* win."

"Yes—you *can*."

"And I *will*."

They stood awhile thus, hands locked, he watching her face as she gazed at the great downy bed of the mist which had now settled in one broad sweep over the land, filling all the hollows and leaving only rounded knolls and higher summits in the radiance of moonlight.

"At whose expense will you win?" she asked at length, turning to him.

"Mr. Bennington's. And, dearest, none will cry me shame—for your sake. It is sacrilege too terrible to contemplate—that such a man should *dare* even to claim you."

"Ah, no; it will be at your expense and mine—and such bitter expense. Do you not see that you love me too well to make yourself less than your

greatest for me—and I would be the same for you. We'll let Mr. Bennington decide, *we* won't throw the dice."

She waited a little, while he gazed in deep abstraction upon her face, then resumed, "You know, dear, the gift of our love will always be with us—none can take that away and only ourselves can put spot or blemish upon it."

He sighed, waking out of his dream. "Shall I ever see with you eye to eye?"

"You do now—in reality."

"Not yet—not yet," he said.

She freed her hands, and began to walk downwards into the thick folds of the mist. He stepped beside her and they saw the chimneys and roof-ridges of Blaenafon breaking the enveloping tent overhead as heads thrust through torn nightcaps.

CHAPTER XI.

THE slope of the thatch ran so steeply from the ridge at the apex of the angle, and slipped so near the ground that it came as matter of surprise it did not go all the way. It halted some eight feet in the air and showed beneath, like a clean washed face under a big bonnet, a spread of dazzling whitewashed wall, with two tiny windows, one on either side of a low door. Stooping, Eben Lloyd emerged from the interior, and then stood erect in the sunlight.

Within the house the uneven floor of earth could be seen, its undulations shaped by the treadings through many years along certain well defined routes, as if the wayfarers made as devious a track about their daily avocations as humanity is popularly credited with doing in its march to its destiny. In wet weather little pools gathered in these hollows and the super-fine city instinct might imagine that thereby was consummated a scene of domestic desolation too revolting to be contemplated by any being above the concepts of a savage. But as in many other mundane affairs our city products of humanity are sorely lacking in the vision which tells. The chickens pecked about Eben's feet, and at intervals rambled within doors and partook of the mashed potato and

barley meal prepared for their use; occasionally one roamed farther into the house and picked up stray crumbs from under the table.

Eben's mother came across the yard with a brimming bucket in each hand, the milk slopping over and making big white blots on the grey flags. She was a little woman, spare in body, active in her movements, and it was easy to see, despite the withering effect of mountain sun and wind through a period of sixty years, whence Eben had inherited his handsome face. Her big ox-brown eyes were beautiful still, and the nose had lost none of its shapeliness, though the sunken cheeks and wrinkled skin, creased and graven as with an etcher's tools, gave an appearance of age rather in excess of her actual years, a phenomenon exceedingly common with those who have lived the outdoor life of these hardy folk. The women do all a woman's work and a large share of the man's, and they are totally unused to the consideration so customary from the male to the female—they haul and carry, working like horses while their men-folk probably gossip with a passing neighbour. So Eben watched his mother enter the house with the brimming buckets of milk, without a thought of relieving her, blinking at her apparently as idle as the cat on the wall enjoying a morning sun bath.

Bryn Gwyn (White Hill) lay in a pool of sunshine that was a temporary patch on the moor's face. The light came through a monster hole in a cloud-canopy that spread from the western horizon and reached in broken splendour to touch the eastern mountain rim. The crater edges of the blue bay of sky were stained with flame tints.

It had been a night of storm, and now the morning was in fitful humour. Water gleamed in the fields, shining amid the upstanding stubble; and the mows of barley and oats glowed in their pale golden colouring. The condition of the fields accounted for the fact that Eben stood thus unoccupied; the oats he had cut down the day before were too wet to be touched for several hours even if no more downfall came. It was early October, and the autumn gales had begun. Cold draughts of wind swam round the yard, sweeping Mrs. Lloyd's scant petticoats tightly about her legs, showing the coarse knitted stockings and the picturesque clogs. Clatter, clatter, she went over the flags to the cow-house, and drove the calves to join their mothers in the meadow beyond; the youthful kine blaring stupidly as they frolicked on the grass and pretended to eat as well as their elders.

Eben drew a book from his pocket, opened it, and sauntered past his mother. She did not speak, only glanced up to him with abounding pride in her bright eyes. When she went to the potato field to dig potatoes for dinner she saw him a long way across the moorland where there were several mountain ponies grazing and a hundred sheep. She supposed he was going to make use of an unoccupied hour to count the animals and look to the rough fencing. Away and away he went, his figure merging at moments into the colouring of the ground about him so that it was difficult to pick him out, and his head was bent continually over his book. Mary Lloyd watched her son when she straightened her back after taking up the produce of one potato root and before she put her clog on the spade to dig another. Suddenly a sprinkle of hail fell, slanting

across from sky to earth in rigid shafts of silver, reflecting the sunbeams; it came smarter and smarter, and Mary saw Eben race for the shelter of a wall and crouch there; the hail stung her face as she hastened to the house with her bucket of soil-clogged potatoes.

During five minutes the hurtle of the storm clothed the whole landscape in silver-grey mail, beating on the confines of distance as a fairy phalanx, sweeping ever onward, dragging a rearguard that was but a trailing remnant, leaving behind a sparkling sunlit world, with every surface washed over with glittering gilt. Mrs. Lloyd came out of the house and crossed to the spring to wash the potatoes. She shaded her eyes with her hand and looked to the moor to see if Eben still sat in cover. Yes, he was sitting beside a clustering bunch of brambles, the grey wall behind him; and when she returned indoors he had not moved.

On the edge of the cultivated land as Eben stared over the browns, russets, golds and purples of the moor's face, a figure appeared. It remained unmoving for several moments and looked no larger than a man's finger upstanding from the edge of the running knoll that formed, in Eben's lowly position, his horizon. The sunlight bathed it and shed an aureole about it, rimming it with a line of fire. It was a woman's form. He could make that much out by the fullness of the clothing about the feet. At sight of it his heart leapt; for it was no mountain woman with short petticoats, and those kilted high out of reach of the wet herbage. It was a lady, but second thoughts told him it must be Miss Garland, not she of whom he dreamed both waking and

sleeping, for Miss Vaughan had never wandered about the country alone as Miss Garland frequently did.

The figure walked along the conspicuous edge of the rising ground, taking a track that resembled the rim of a basin; and Eben, an indistinguishable iota in the neutral tone of his environment, watched its movements dreamily. He recognised it definitely as Miss Garland as it wound its way circle-wise about him. At close quarters she was shorter than Miss Vaughan, but at a distance, her delicate slenderness gave the impression of a height not insignificant. She walked splendidly—like a hound, Eben thought, there was such supple grace in the poise of every limb. The wall under whose shelter he was sitting cut across the basin two-thirds of the way in the circumference. Soon Miss Garland passed from his sight on his left—he supposed she was pursuing a tortuous track that led eventually to the highway; and in another minute he had forgotten her.

The sun was pleasantly warm, the branching cluster of starved brambles made a sufficient shield against the scouring of the wind, and with that happy ability of the mountain-bred individual to slip into animal drowsing at any hour of the day, Eben was soon in a condition that was neither sleeping nor waking. He did not close his eyes, but stared with glassy fixedness at a point a few feet in front of him where a tiny yellow flower upreared its graceful head, just a star among the mossy turf. But he did not see the blossom, he only saw the picture his thoughts shaped —Enid Mary's dark splendours; and there was the old story of Helen seething in his brain. Could he be Paris, and bear her away for his own delight!

He set his love high and wholly apart from the every-day wooing of his fellows on the mountain; it was not of their world, nor of their order. When he had entered the Church, when he wore clothes that were gentleman's clothes, and he had polished himself into some semblance of a gentleman—was it possible that she might think of him? The yearning in his heart was a great pain. For he was not blind; love quickens sight, and *he* had seen the girl in Henry Ackworth's presence and was not deceived. He saw that she had no eyes for the rest of the world when the vicar was at hand; but, to his intense relief he also perceived that the young clergyman was totally unconscious of the way in which he was regarded. In his remotest and most sacred soul Eben breathed a prayer many times a day that the vicar might never wake up from his lethargy. It wrung his heart to desperation in moments of intense realisation of the situation. The vicar was on the spot; and there was the girl's magnificent beauty ever near to tempt him; he was of her own status in society—no obstacle intervened. Great beads of perspiration broke on Eben's brow, and the need for expeditiousness in raising himself to a better social rank became a passion, and he worked at his books with a concentration that dulled even his anxieties. His Helen was so precious a jewel, all the world that saw her must surely desire to possess her; any day the terrible fact might be revealed that the scales had fallen from Mr. Ackworth's eyes.

Sarah Garland was skirting the wall on the other side of which Eben Lloyd was ensconced. She believed herself absolutely removed from every living thing. In cursory glances as she followed the edge

of the basin-like dipping of the ground she had detected no sign of movement anywhere beyond the nibbling sheep and ponies. It was mid-morning when she halted at length three yards from Eben's resting-place. She had been out walking two hours. She did a great deal of walking these autumn days.

The wall reached her shoulders; and she rested her hands upon it, and stared over the extent of bog-land now coming to its heritage of mature colouring. Rushes stood in battalions, yellowing, browning, reddening, bronzing, according to the quality of staining power in the bog-water that oozed about their roots, trickling its secret runnels out of sight, soaking the mossy turf as a sponge, running to clear brown pools here and there where a depression in the ground gave it a bowl to fill. Lapwings strutted, nodding their delicately-shaped and crested heads, or rose with a cry to a hazardous flight that terminated a few yards from the starting-place. Rarely, a sheep looked up from its nibbling to call to a stray lamb, that, late in coming to birth, was yet in the tender stage of growth, though winter was at hand. The spring lambs looked almost as large as their dams, from the fact that the ewes had undergone the summer shearing while the youngsters were permitted to carry their maiden fleece. Sarah saw all these things as parts in a picture. She watched another storm arise in the west—the huge cloud uplifted on a monster limb showing the rounded shelvings of the shaping muscles, with tendon lines like an écorché; the cloud texture itself was like carded wool in a whirl of motion; the tint sombre, as if dyed in woad juice. Then the hail pelted about her, stinging her face.

When the flurry had passed there was a coating of white over the dryest spaces of the bog, until the sun came out and the little snow pebbles dissolved in a twinkling. Where houses had been roofed with slate the sunlight splashed on them with dazzling effect; the thatched dwellings held the hail in crevices, that showed as barren country patched with snow.

Sarah gazed away over the rolling landscape to a far point where a higher hill uprose against the sky, slightly conical, and on the very tip of it a dark speck appeared from the other side, climbing into view by degrees—first a hat, then a head and shoulders, and so on till the whole stood erect, outlined against a background of retreating storm cloud. Her heart throbbed with a sudden access of speed; for with intuitional vision she descried the figure to be Henry Ackworth's. She clasped her hands, crushing the fingers in a painful grip and cried aloud as the lapwings cried, the desolate to the desolate earth and air and sky—"Henry Ackworth, Henry Ackworth."

Eben Lloyd stirred. Great as was his terror of revealing himself the sound of Sarah's voice had given him a shock that rendered him incapable of regulating his movements for the instant. He turned so that he could see what had called forth her exclamation. The dark speck was dipping to level ground—was it the vicar? He was in doubt for a moment, then a characteristic gesture made him certain. He peered through the cluster of brambles, with uplifted eyes and saw Sarah with her head upon her arms.

Eben never knew how long she stood thus. He became as rapt as she. His whole world was

revolutionised by those words of hers and the manner of uttering them. Did she love the vicar, then Enid Mary was not so cut off from her humble lover as had been his anxious dread. He held himself still as an animal watching prey, lifting his eyes at intervals to see her bowed head. Yet another flurry of hail came over from the dark womb of western sky that was travailing continually with the throes of storm births.

It was high noon and the air pulsing with renewed warmth from the sun when Sarah at length moved from her position and wandered slowly away. Eben did not stir until he thought she was out of sight; then he crawled fifty yards on hands and knees and assumed an upright pose in the open. Not a soul was to be seen anywhere, until shrill and thin through the blue atmosphere came his mother's voice calling him to dinner.

It was Martinmas time, *Calan Gauaf*, the Welsh call it, that is to say, the beginning of winter, which seems to fit in with the ancient belief that the weather on the day of St. Martinmas foretells the conditions that will prevail during the coming season. The famous old man who went into the churchyard on Martinmas Eve with candle and lantern to find out which way the wind blew may have had a substratum of wisdom as the basis of his action, after all, and if he had lived in Blaenafon on this particular Martinmas Eve he would have learned with all speed that the wind was blowing south by south-west, and half a gale at that. There was no rain.

The wind leapt at every object as if to sweep it out of its path; the trees groaned in their steady

resistance, and lashed their half-bared boughs impotently. The whole void of the night seemed a black fleece making a matrix for the earth. Eben Lloyd, bearing a lantern that only made the blackness blacker beyond the area of its illuminating power, steered north-eastwards, largely driven by the blast. From a distance the point of light from his lantern seemed a fallen and wandering star. Sometimes it flickered so near to extinction there was utter darkness for an instant, then a glimmer, as it struggled for the mastery and finally won. Eben passed through the churchyard, the beams glinting on the slate headstones, and the rank grasses smothering the graves. He came to the vicarage gate and extinguished his light.

Henry stood up as the young man entered his study. "Ah—Eben! Sit down. Draw that chair nearer the fire."

"I've come to say 'good-bye,' sir. I'm off to the mines in the south to-morrow."

"Are you? Well, then, sit down for a farewell chat."

Eben stared into the fire after he was seated, answering Ackworth's questions.

"And so you are off in the morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"How are you going to get to the station?"

"My uncle will take me and my box in his cart."

"And you have made all comfortable for your mother?"

"Yes, sir. As far as is possible—she doesn't like it now it's come to my going."

"No, no, of course not. I'll go and see her and try to cheer her a little."

"Thank you, sir."

"Is she to remain quite alone?"

"Yes. I can't persuade her to have anybody in the house with her. She's never been used to any stranger about the place."

"Ah—well, maybe she'll be happiest alone."

"Very likely, sir. And the next house is within call."

"In quiet weather, I suppose you mean," laughed the vicar, "not to-night."

"No, not to-night," smiled Eben.

Then there was silence during several moments, and the sound of the wind seemed to supply the lack of their voices and fill the room with veritable clamour. Henry got up and went to the bookshelves and selected a couple of volumes that he had decided to give to Eben as a parting gift. It was while his back was still to the room that the young man began to speak again.

"I'd got something to say, sir, if you'll listen."

Ackworth looked round. The lad's voice had a new note in it. He returned to the table, laying the books upon it, but said nothing.

"It may be I've no business to say a word about it," Eben resumed. "But it's so hard to go away without speaking." He looked up suddenly, his eyes flashing. "It's harder to go, sir, than I thought."

Ackworth nodded.

"And though I meant to go with my secret and never tell a word till I'd won my way—I've given way a bit, sir, and should like to tell you, if I might. It's about Miss Vaughan."

His skin was the tint of a ripened hazel shell;

deep crimson ran through it now, killing its brown tones.

"I can't tell how you'll look at it, sir. I'm too far beneath her notice now, I know. But there's a feeling I can't get rid of—that when I've won my way a bit towards being a gentleman, whether she might consider me fit——" He paused. The words were hard to enunciate. They were so inadequate for his meaning.

Henry leaned against the table, thrusting his hands into his pockets.

"Do you think me too presumptuous, sir?" Eben looked up.

Henry moved uneasily. "No, Eben, certainly not. A man's feelings shouldn't be classed in that way. But I don't think it would be wise to tell you to hope —a great deal. Mind you, I know absolutely nothing of Miss Vaughan's sentiments—with regard to such a matter, but——" he paused awkwardly.

Eben looked down.

Ackworth drew his chair forward and seated himself. "Look here, Eben, I don't say despond, but on the other hand, it is well to be prepared for all hazards. You must see that yourself."

Eben sat upright again. "You see, sir, it's harder for me than if I were a gentleman. This going to the coal digging—I can't tell whether it won't go against me in the end—with her."

"It shouldn't," said Ackworth, decidedly.

"I'd like to go and hide myself and work and never let her see me again till I was fit to speak to her if I could—but there's mother."

"Naturally. We always want to do things our own way, Eben, but as a rule we are not permitted."

Eben lifted his face with a queer expression upon it—thwarted impulse and nervous restraint commingling. "Life is hard, sir. A man wants a thing and everything goes against him getting it—and he mayn't be a bad man getting his deserts for all that."

Ackworth smiled a little. He indulged in crude bits of philosophy of that sort himself at times.

"Quite true, Eben. But as men we are asked to face life as it is, you know; not to quarrel because it isn't shaped quite to our own particular pattern."

"It isn't as if I think I should ever be worthy—" began Eben, then paused awkwardly. "I wish," he cried with sudden vehemence, "I wish I'd never seen her till I'd made myself more of a gentleman. I wish she'd never seen me as I am now. Whatever I may do, she'll always see the big clumsy farm fellow underneath—always."

"Well, don't despair, Eben. We cannot tell what time may bring forth; all sorts of changes may come, and the path you think so hard may become quite simple."

He listened to the deep organ notes of the wind as it ran riot in the tree-tops; then it sank a moment, and in the lull the merest fluttering of trembling leaves seemed a fullness of sound.

"How long will you be, Eben, before you can go to college?" he asked, to turn the lad's thoughts, if possible.

"A year, perhaps. I have some money now. I shall save more this one winter at the mines than I can in three at home."

"That is good news. And your studies—shall you be able to read when working hours are past?"

"I am hoping that."

There was another silence, till Ackworth aroused himself and said, "Well, Eben, the best thing will be to think of your work for the present and let other things lie idle. There's plenty of time in life if we do not spoil all by being in too much hurry. Stick to your books and get a scholarship to one of the great Universities—that will be the thing to make a man of you. If you are a year or two longer in getting it—it will pay in the end."

"Yes, sir. That is what I am thinking myself."

He got up to go shortly after. He stood hesitating. Then Ackworth said, divining his difficulty, "You had better come and let Mrs. Vaughan wish you good-bye and good luck."

Eben followed Henry, and when they got into the hall who should come floating downstairs, singing, but Enid Mary. Eben coloured to the roots of his hair. It seemed to his super-sensitive temperament that he had as good as told her of his hopes. Ackworth took no notice of the young man, but said to Enid, "Is my aunt in the drawing-room?"

"Yes," she answered, and nodded to Eben, carelessly.

She entered the drawing-room just as Eben was about to leave it.

"Eben is off to-morrow morning, Enid," said Ackworth.

"Oh, indeed. Good-bye." She looked at Eben with blank indifference.

And oddly enough her words had the curious effect of stirring his resentment. He bowed with a grace that astonished them all. "Good-bye, Miss Vaughan," he said and disregarded the half move-

ment on her side to shake hands. He had startled her into better manners.

She went to the fire as they left the room, and stared down to the blaze of peat and coal on the hearth. "Good Heavens, mother, what airs Eben puts on at times," she said.

CHAPTER XII.

HENRY ACKWORTH'S friendship with Fenton Underwood dated from college days, and their intimacy had that essential quality in which every barrier surmounted became an added strength to the mutual bonds. Underwood was the elder by several years, and as he put it "did a little posing on that account —just for the looks of the thing." He admired Henry Ackworth more than the latter's unpretentious nature permitted him to perceive, and was fond of forecasting a brilliant future for his friend.

Henry had used to laugh as they sat in their rooms in College talking endlessly.

"I'm going to be a parish priest," he said, "and in the most unambitious way. I'm going to *live* in the mountains—do you know what that means?"

"I don't."

"Ah—I don't think I can explain it either—I grew up to it, you know, my mother *soaked* me in the atmosphere of her old home, so that I had but the one ambition from the beginning."

Then Underwood answered, "Go to your mountains by all means, my dear fellow; it may suffice as well as another place for a nursery for you, but never imagine you will be able to sink all your intellectual

assets in the barren soil, because some day you'll discover you have been merely finishing your education. It's deep calling unto deep at present, the blood in you crying to its native land—a splendid emotion in its way, but only an emotion."

Ackworth shook his head and smiled.

"You know," continued the other, "you're one of those fellows who won't come to your maturity until years later than commonplace folks—you see, there's so much to mature in you. I give you till thirty—by that time you'll find that a handful of picturesque mountaineers won't satisfy the passion for man in you. And I hope to be on hand when that climax is reached, because you'll be just the man I shall want when it pleases the Fates to take my dear old curmudgeon grandfather to his rest. That hole of a village wants sweeping off the face of the earth. I boil with indignation every time I go down to pay my respects—save the mark—to him. I blush as I go by those hovels in which folks are expected to conduct life on decent lines. There isn't a weather-tight cottage on the estate, nor a drop of water fit for the cattle even to drink. I've had more than one bicker with the old gentleman—it would make a saint swear."

And now old Sir Fenton Underwood was dead and young Sir Fenton reigned in his stead. Henry had received the news by telegram first, then came a long letter from his friend.

"I think I will come to you for a week, if convenient," it ran. "I simply must talk to you about everything, and it is long since we met." The young man had been abroad for two years, and only returned hastily upon news reaching him of his grandfather's

expected end. "I feel *crushed* under the weight of the responsibilities that have now fallen to my lot—God knows how I am to set about helping these poor down-trodden souls! It wrings tears out of a man to stand helpless and ashamed before the stupendous crime of such neglect of one's fellow creatures. I know you will understand and sympathise with my position or I wouldn't so far disclose what a womanish sort of chap I am. I saw a baby die yesterday. God!—I'd no idea such fractional portions of humanity meant so much in life. The poor mother—she's twenty-two, by the way—distracted with her grief, came running from the house as I passed along the street, and literally dragged me into the evil-smelling hole where the little thing lay breathing its last. She pointed to it, and denounced me and all my tribe. Her words stung like a lash—but she was right, doubly right. She called Heaven to witness that they who permitted such a state of things to exist deserved a like fate. I'll house the poor souls in the Manor itself, if there is nowhere else, while respectable dwellings are put up. I'll make a wholesale sweep of these kennels. But the winter is well-nigh upon us, and it seems hopeless to make the big move until the cold weather is past—I want your advice about present alleviations; though what would be a thousand times more effective would be your bodily presence. How near are you to fulfilling my prophecy? Are you not almost ready for a wider sphere of action? Have you about outgrown your mountains and mountaineers? I am devoutly hoping so. I want a grand vizier badly; and The Priory needs a tenant—also badly." The Priory was the dower house on Sir Fenton's estate.

The pony crept up a long incline at his own pace. The afternoon was declining and the weather was blustering. Ackworth was on his way to the station to meet Sir Fenton Underwood. He gazed abroad over the familiar landscape lost in thought.

Nature is prolific in her handiwork in wild lone places where the foot of man is not forever treading out her energies. And summer, gorgeous as are its splendours and dazzling the sparkling airs, never seems a time of such articulate comprehension of her moods as the seasons of less strenuous output. It is in autumn and winter days, when constant storm rolls up from the dim Atlantic and smothers the hills in the spume of its furies, that there is more sympathetic understanding between the two extremes of her handicraft—man and the earth growths.

Henry Ackworth, as the pony trotted or ambled, as the road demanded, was conscious of this as a subcurrent of thought, a background of appropriate tones to a medley of mental impressions. Sarah Garland was the central figure; all his life issues would henceforth radiate from or converge towards her as the pivot of his being. And he was sensible, too, of Underwood's queries, and sensible in an unfamiliar, a questioning way. By infinitesimal degrees there was creeping upon him a new knowledge of himself; it dated from the day of awakening to his love for Sarah; a knowledge apart from his life-long absorption in himself as an idealist, an enthusiast in certain emotions of patriotism in the artistic sense. Love was delving to deeper depths and reaching secret springs that unknown to himself had ever flowed in hidden strength and purity beneath the workings of some lesser phase of his nature, which hitherto he had

imagined to be the whole. It had come with keen smart that he must needs adjust himself to new outlooks, that his points of view had to be overhauled—and very searchingly. What of this love of the hills and the simple dwellers thereon? Was it narrow? Was it his particular form of lotus-eating thus to believe the little part he had chosen to be a big rôle? Again and again came that rigorous impact of Sarah's attitude with regard to herself and the man to whom she was pledged—by word, not by sacred bonds of love. In the mastering rush of his own passion it had been but the oversetting of a nine-pin in his path to sweep aside the claims of Bennington; but her stern maintenance of this other man's rights was a new, and ever poignant fact.

Then, as she put it, it was also *her* right and the right of their love too. He was as one not wholly blind groping by the aid of a very little light, caught at moments, and lost again. In the law of human things could it be that Bennington had a right in the whole cosmos of the situation? Without descending to the details of his present social eclipse, what of the man who falls into such eclipse, what of him as an entity in the social fabric that included a woman of Sarah Garland's type; was not he but a ravening wolf, seeking only to devour her? *Had* he any rights, or was it that she flung a glamour even over her own perception in the moments when she made Henry discern without appreciating her attitude? He tried to plough the very depths of his heart in self-examination. And then it was that he caught a fleeting glimpse of her as the objective form of a devotion that rose beyond the need of her physical presence. As ever he was two men, the

desiring, emotional one, checked, held in restraint by the bigger curves of character, the grasp of a man upon himself, and the decencies of *being* himself.

So much dreaming on the way brought him late to the station, and there stood Fenton Underwood on the edge of the platform awaiting him.

"I was rapidly beginning to feel a Robinson Crusoe," cried that gentleman, as they grasped hands.

They set forth on the homeward journey in silence. Henry was still self-absorbed, in spite of the pleasure of the meeting. Fenton Underwood surveyed the rolling country, fretted with broken gleams from a stormy sunset; the wind boomed over the great wastes with the muffled clamour of distant artillery. Near by a woman crossed a stubble field in the full rays of low-falling sunlight, and her apron glowed with flame tints. On the farther mountains were deep-toned shadow caverns of the same imperial tint as the heather patching their slopes; the bracken was bronze, a bog, deeply sunk, from which much fuel had been cut, lay in a hollow amid bleached hills and appeared as an ink blot on a bright page. As they slowly climbed the weary ascent from the village of the railway station, it seemed as if each little plateau they reached had its own private hurricane.

"Your wind tears at a man's clothes as if it had teeth," remarked Underwood.

They passed few people on the road—a woman carrying a bag of turf on her back, her clogs heavy with the black peat mire; and after another slow mile, a huge red man, agrin in greeting to them, astride a pony scarce bigger in framework than himself; the little creature's tail touched its heels, its stomach was blown to enormous size with grass feeding. The

man's great feet dangled near the ground, and to Ackworth's salutation he cried a reply in big laughing notes and waved his hand a foot above his head. Then they went through a flock of sheep, upon whose fleeces the owner's initials were branded in bright new reddle, the whole of their coats being suffused with the pigment to a soft sunset tinge. The man with them nodded in gloomy silence as he went by, in striking contrast to the last passenger.

Up and up, they mounted to the peak of the immediate neighbourhood, a very palace of the winds, topped by a ragged plantation of partially dead larches, all leaning one way, as a posse of mendicants accepting a dole. The wind scoured this exposed summit with biting breath, and whipped Ackworth's hat from his head, bowling it along the road behind them at racing speed. He laughed, looking ruefully at its splendid pace. "It's hopeless to attempt to capture it," he said.

Underwood was suggesting a substitute from his travelling bag, and searching for his keys when they heard a mighty bellow and looked round to see the big red man, waving the vicar's hat wildly to attract their attention. And when he came up with them the poor little blown pony was panting piteously, her nostrils dilating.

"I see it. I catch it like a bird," said he, grinning, so that his blue eyes sparkled, and his tangled mane of red hair seemed a flame about his face.

Henry felt in his pocket for a reward, but the man touched his sleeve. "No, sir, it is a pleasure to do it for a gentleman," and wheeled his pony round and set forth on the return route with a farewell wave of the hand.

After that the journey was uneventful; there were no mile stones, and distance was calculated by landmarks. Seabirds flew over; lapwings cried from the bogs on either hand; small birds fluttered about; a robin perched on a twig, filled his little throat and piped his vespers. While a flurry of hail and rain was racing across the landscape like blown smoke they met a herd of cattle being driven to water by a servant girl; she wore a rough homespun skirt kilted high about her waist, her stalwart limbs in outline like a cart horse's. She was bare-headed, her cheeks round and brilliantly red, she carried a switch and struck one animal and then another with it, uttering hoarse cries. But she halted to watch the pony-cart pass, staring, with twisted, interested visage, the white rods of the hail making a curtain through which she peered.

Heavy battlemented clouds arched themselves over a windy sunset, and dazzling rays blazed upon the land in iridescent splendours—the wet earth, the drenched grass, the tawny leaves of the few stub bushes all reflecting a radiance of startling brilliance.

But in five minutes it was gone and evening fell suddenly—chill, grey; and the vast sweeps of barren moorland took on a fantastic weirdness. The veil of the dusk thickened, obscuring rib and wrinkle in its scarred and weathered face, smoothing to ultimate oneness the curvings and dippings and cunning artifices of expression. Then the stars came out in the great spaces of the sky between the big clouds, and a week old moon swam above the eastern hill horizon, making saffron pods out of a shredded fleece of vapour, and crowning summits with opaline pallors—bright heads above the dusk draperies about their

bases. Mars came into sight with its red lights, constantly shifting veils, alternately hiding and revealing the heart of pure flame.

The conversation between Henry and his friend had been desultory, with long silences between.

"What do you think of our mountain splendours?" he asked at length, shaking himself mentally into a more sociable mood.

"Oh, splendid, truly—but too one-sided, for my taste."

"One-sided?"

"Not enough of the human element, you know. Nature wants adorning with her masterpiece—mankind—to show in fullest perfection."

"And what then?—you have cities spring up, and man crushes nature's glories underfoot, and reigns alone in unlovely congested masses."

"Ah—there you picture one extreme; this is the other."

"But we are not without the human element altogether, of course," said Henry.

"What of them, though? Are they not what one might call stale, like trout in the warm stagnant pools when the river runs low? Pardon me reverting so soon to my old gospel, Henry, but what of yourself in that respect?"

Henry laughed. "You catch the taint of staleness about me at once, then?"

"Perhaps I came looking for it," laughed the other in return. "Still harping on the old string, you will say."

Then in spite of such a good beginning they fell silent again, and the pony coming to a bit of good road that was neither a toil upward nor a painful

descent, trotted five hundred yards, and the ringing of her hoof beats filled in the quietude.

Underwood was wondering. There was something new and unaccustomed about Henry. His silences were not friend's silences that are congenial as words, but aloof, remote, chilling. With some pertinacity he waited for him to speak again, and a long gap elapsed ere Ackworth turned with startling suddenness and said, "I don't know what you're thinking of me—this is deadly dull for you."

Underwood laughed on a merry note. "It must be that your solitude has shaped you to your environment—you *are* quiet, I admit."

"Let us talk about your village, then?"

"Very well, to start, when will you make it yours also?"

"Ah—that is impossible—quite impossible—at present."

Underwood bit his underlip in the dusk beneath a beech hedge and wondered yet again. Henry was not himself; the words were nothing—it was the intonation.

"Then for the moment we'll leave that point. How am I getting on, you say? Oh, it's uphill work. I want your help. At any rate you'll give me a week or two as soon as possible—Christmas, say? You see my difficulty is twofold—or rather manyfold. The unhappy creatures, I am convinced, are terribly degraded by the lives they are forced to lead, and their one idea of my mission in life is as the grand distributor of my grandfather's hoard. But you see it demoralises them—indiscriminate charity is never good. I don't want to sap the last remaining shreds of self-respect from the poor souls; I want to make

men and women of them as well as relieve them of the too sordid terrors of existence. You see the position?"

"Perfectly. And I can tell you of someone who will be any amount more use to consult than I——"

"That sounds encouraging—and interesting. Who might this heaven-sent mortal be?"

"Miss Garland, a new resident in Blaenafon."

Underwood exclaimed, "A new resident in Blaenafon! I thought never a soul crossed your borders from one generation to another."

"It was an unusual event."

"I am terribly inquisitive. Tell me about the lady, please. She must be something out of the common to select Blaenafon as a centre."

"Miss Garland comes from England, of course," said Ackworth, an unmastered touch of constraint in his manner. "She has a model village, I understand."

"Oh, happy lady! How did she attain to such an enviable possession? Was it by personal effort?"

"Well, no—it was an inheritance."

"Ah—that's different. Is the lady—young?"

"Oh, yes."

"H'm!"

A flash of intuition made Underwood silent.

Henry turned his head after awhile. "Look here," he said, "I shall have to tell you, I may as well explain things now."

Underwood folded his arms and looked ahead.

"Miss Garland came to Blaenafon in the spring," Henry continued, "she and an old servant. It turned out that she had been wandering for a year or two—had some queer distaste to the ordered ways of her

ordinary life, and had happened on Blaenafon accidentally. H'm!—I found out a couple of months ago the reason for these apparent vagaries—she is engaged to be married to a man who is now serving a term of penal servitude."

Underwood moved with a jerk. "Good God!"

Ackworth "tched" to the pony.

"You'll guess, of course, how it was that I made the discovery," he said, after a little pause.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Underwood under his breath.

CHAPTER XIII.

IT was a crisp wintry day. All the higher hills were coated in a thin layer of snow; on the lower slopes it had melted within two hours of sunrise, leaving the great wastes naked, giving them that peculiarly cheerless appearance, a starved, damp, untidy look. The very rushes seemed limp, and hung forward against each other, shivering in the thin wind that blew. In mid-afternoon the taste of frostiness that had lent a sting to the air all day began to deepen to hard cold, and there was a withered touch on the face of the earth as the sunlight paled to setting.

Evan Pugh, the weather greens of his hat lighted to softest medley of shades by the fading beams, walked up the road carefully balancing a brimming jug of milk. He ascended the steps to Cae'rmynydd gate, entered the premises, and went upward to the door, and knocked.

"Good-afternoon, ma'am," he said to Eliza, who replied to his rapping, "That woman o' mine, she says, 'Evan, take Miss Garland a drop o' milk, as it's such cold weather to-day; she may like a drop extry to have it hot for her supper to-night.' She's very good-hearted, poor thing," and he offered the jug.

Eliza took it with no good grace. As she turned indoors she suddenly looked round and glanced at his boots. "Don't you come over that doorstone wi' them boots o' yourn," she said tartly.

"Indeed, no, ma'am, I can see you been cleanin' the floor," answered he, blandly.

"An' if we hadn't, we don't want you inside," muttered she, as she disappeared into the kitchen with his gift. When she brought the jug back, he quietly slipped it into the pocket of his coat, leaned against the doorpost and observed, "I see Miss Garland going by a bit ago, ma'am. She be a rare lady for walking and riding. She got a good courage on that little pony, too. She don't never seem afraid o' none o' the roads, not if they're ever so bad."

Eliza made no answering observation, she merely looked as if she would like to shut the door in his face.

But Pugh was not so easily ousted when he came for a chat, as in the present instance, the milk being only a means to an end.

"Indeed, we all get very fond of her, too." Pugh sighed a little and paused, as if for his companion to offer her quota to the conversation. But she did not speak. So he went on, "There's the children'll miss her awful if she go away; no matter where she go there's pennies coming out of her pocket for 'em. They like that, poor things. And there's that woman o' mine she'd willing let Miss Garland have all the milk she wants for nothing if we wasn't so glad of a little money, ma'am. Ye—es," he looked with a dreamy expression towards the south-western sky, now faintly pink with light from the sinking sun.

"Indeed, we shall miss her a good bit, and Mr. Ackworth too, and no mistake, ma'am."

"What are ye talking about?" asked Eliza sharply.

"The two of 'em gettin' married, ma'am. I daresay you'll be getting ready to go away pretty soon now."

"You're off your head," she returned brusquely.

"Ah, indeed, ma'am," said he mildly, rolling his eyes to the lintel. "There's the word going round among the people as Miss Garland come into these parts to court Mr. Ackworth, and now they've made it up and going to get married pretty soon."

"Well, if ever in all my life!" exclaimed Eliza. "What next? I suppose you'll be a-marryin' me next."

"Indeed, ma'am, there's nobody in this country as would suit you, you not speaking the Welsh. Mr. Ackworth talks both languages, you see, and Miss Garland gets on with the Welsh fine. But nobody expects as they'll stop to live in this country after they're married. It 'ud be too quiet for a lady like Miss Garland to stop here always. We can see that."

"An' where on earth did you get that tale from?" demanded Eliza.

"Well, we see with our eyes, ma'am. It's on Sundays, in church, as we see the most. He put his eyes on her so as nobody can make any mistake. And she sit with her eyes down most of the time. That woman o' mine she ain't got no edoocation, poor thing, but she see it as well as others, and she say to me, 'Evan, the vicar is in love with Miss Garland.' 'Pooh, you foolish thing,' I says to her, 'what do you know about such things?' just to keep her tongue quiet, ma'am. But I see the same thing myself. An'

a lot o' other folk besides. Not as we say anything out loud, because that ain't the Welsh way. We keep it quiet about the marriages till the last, when nobody can hide it any longer, so as if there should be any mistake, then there'll be no talk and jeering on the poor things. We always do it that way; it's the fashion of this country. An' if you ask a young woman if she's going to be married only a month before, she'll tell you 'no,' in a minute. Somebody says to that woman o' mine just before I married her, and she'd got our eldest in her arms already, 'That Evan Pugh's going to marry you, then?' 'It's a lie,' says she, in a minute. Like that now, we are, ma'am. Ye—es, indeed."

"You seem to me a funny lot."

"Indeed, ma'am, I daresay now. I remember when I was in London carrying milk for a man—he's worth a lot o' money now, selling the milk and water—I remember thinking I never see such cur'us ways as the English got. When I see a young man and woman going along the street at night with their arms linked in one another, I says to myself, 'That'll be a hard job for him to get shut of her if he change his mind.' There isn't no pertection for a man in that way of getting a wife—that's the way we think in this country."

"And what about the woman?" Eliza's scorn was picturesque, but Pugh was imperturbable.

"The woman, ma'am. Well, there ain't no harm to her if she get another chap."

Eliza lifted her hands. "You *are* a set," was all she said.

"Yes, ma'am, we got the old fashions from hundreds of years ago."

"An' the sooner you change 'em the quicker and the better," was the rejoinder.

"Well, very likely, ma'am. We're rather a poor ignorant lot o' folks up on these mountains. We ain't had much edoocation, you see. The children with the school every day of their lives will know better nor we do the right way of doing things."

"It's to be hoped so, that's certain."

"Of course, with a lady and gentleman there ain't no need for 'em to try to hide what is the matter with 'em—they won't want to change their minds, and Mr. Ackworth's a very high gentleman, and there isn't no fear in the world as he'd ever serve a woman bad."

"What d'ye mean?"

"Why, he won't change his mind and like somebody else in a few months; just common chaps they do that, you know, ma'am, often enough. Bless you, ma'am, I could tell you a lot o' tales about that—poor girls thinking they'd got a husband safe as could be, and then find as he was going after two of 'em at once, and thinking to marry the other after all."

"Somebody ought to horsewhip that sort."

"Indeed, ma'am, they don't in this country."

"H'm—well, you can tell anybody you like as you've all got hold of the wrong end of the stick about Miss Garland. She ain't going to marry nobody this good bit yet."

"Ah, indeed, ma'am." Pugh showed no surprise, only tolerant interest of a new version of the case. "But you don't come to church, ma'am, and so you don't see 'em when there's nobody else looking. Why, indeed, he put his eyes on her when he begin the sermon and never take 'em off once. And he preach splendid; we never hear him make such grand

sermons in all the time he been here—great long words, and his voice going up and down—*beau*tiful. Like hearing a man saying poetry. We can't understand him not a bit, it's too high for such poor ignorant folk, but there's them as have the tears in their eyes when he stop. That woman o' mine, poor thing, I've seen her cry at Mr. Ackworth's preaching—'It's like heaven,' she says, poor soul, not as she's ever likely to know what heaven's like, she got a lot o' ways as'll shut her out of there, poor thing."

Eliza, to his no small surprise, laid her hands on her hips, leaned back against the door and broke into laughter.

"And where are you going?" she cried.

"When, ma'am?" he asked demurely.

"When you die, of course."

"Indeed, ma'am, I'm not so good as I should like to be. But they tell us the Lord is merciful."

"Well, don't ye think He'll have mercy on your wife as well as on you."

"Indeed, it's hard to say, ma'am. She's a very ignorant woman, and got a lot o' bad ways, as I tell her very often."

"Does she ever tell you of your faults?"

He looked puzzled. "That wouldn't be for a woman to do, would it, ma'am, not unless she was a bit in a temper."

"Well, I should think she gets in a temper with you pretty often, doesn't she?'

"No, ma'am. She ain't a bad-tempered woman."

"Don't she tell you what a lazy fellow you are?"

"Indeed, ma'am, that's a mistake. I tell you the truth now—it's my health won't let me do a lot o' work. I suffer dreadful with the indigestion."

"I don't wonder—you never do nothing to work your victuals off."

"And she's a woman as likes to do all the work," pursued Pugh, still unperturbed. "She's never so happy as when she's working as hard as a man."

"My goodness! that's lucky for you. You'd find it different if you married an Englishwoman; *she'd* tell you what o'clock it was without much ado."

"Very likely you're right, ma'am. There's them sort among the Welsh as well; but I never went courting any o' them. I see this woman a good many years before I let her know I was thinking to marry her; I was finding out what she could do, an' I go to see her sometimes. Indeed, she was very thankful to me when I married her."

"I shouldn't ha' thought there'd been much need. It's you as ought to be thankful to her—she's a precious sight more use in the world than you are."

Pugh looked reflectively at the last lingering pinks of the sunset. He was unconscious that Eliza was trying her utmost by brusque uncivil speech to "choke him off," to use her own expression. She wasn't in favour of his not infrequent visits to the house on the smallest of pretexts; with her blunt English methods his sinuosities were odious in her eyes; but Pugh would no more have dreamt of taking offence at her pointed shafts of scorn than of resenting the raindrops wetting him. He sighed, pleasantly content with men and things, and remarked that it was going to be a sharp night.

"So 'tis, and I'm thinking this door's been open a bit too long already, fillin' the house wi' draughts; so if you don't mind I'll bid ye 'good-afternoon,' and shut it."

"Well, indeed, ma'am, I daresay you're right. That woman o' mine'll be fine an' pleased as you took the milk." He paced three steps slowly, then apparently another item of interest occurred to him, for he halted, turned and observed. "Did you hear, ma'am, about that high gentleman as is coming to the vicarage? The servant told that woman o' mine about it—he's a lord, so she says."

"Sich rubbish!" ejaculated Eliza, and closed the door forthwith.

Pugh ambled down the steps at a leisurely rate, his eye apparently upon the beauties of the sunset, a certain rapt expression on his heavy countenance. There was a sea of clearest green along the western edge of the world, toning rapidly to faint gold, over which the land vapours were weaving a veiling of dusky gossamer. On the crown of a hill to the south-west was a little group of larches, standing out against the brilliant background of the sky as turreted roofs, and the light glowing through the interstices of the branches made lace patterns in flame tints.

Arrived at the bottom of the steps Pugh stood reflectively regarding his boots, upon which was a dull grey coating of many layers of mud.

"She ain't such a good-hearted woman as Miss Garland herself," he murmured at length, lifting his head to the sky once again. "We was counting as we should get a bit o' cake for tea out o' that jug o' milk."

On the other side of the valley his sheep were feeding. He stood and gazed upon them abstractedly for awhile. His dog, which had been curled in a nook at the roadside awaiting him, got to its feet lazily, and stretched itself with a yawn.

The sunset colours died out of the sky and the nipping airs ran over the land in eerie whisperings.

Suddenly Pugh spoke to the dog, and forthwith it ran across the open country till it came into the midst of the feeding sheep. They scattered incontinently to the four points of the compass, and Pugh began to gesticulate with his arms and to shout. The dog being in mid-youth, ran hither and thither, further distracting the sheep instead of herding them, and Pugh's tones, now rasped with anger, rang to the very heavens with rich full-mouthed curses upon the creature's maladroitness. Again and again he yelled and waved his arms, his hat, even the milk jug was called into requisition, and ever more with grating, bitter invective, he hurled opprobrium upon his four-footed adjunct. "Thou unblessed dog! Thou unblessed dog!"

When Sarah Garland entered the vicarage drawing-room, a stranger turned his eyes towards her. He regarded her with critical glances as greetings passed between the ladies. When it came to his turn to be introduced, he bowed over her hand rather formally. He was very critical indeed. Enid Mary helped her to loosen her furs, doting as she always did upon their beauty.

As Sarah moved to the seat Sir Fenton Underwood placed for her, the door opened and Henry came in. With one hand on the chair, she turned to him. Fenton Underwood stepped back to his corner and stared into the fire.

He had wavered through the moments since Sarah had come into the room whether to accord her the palm of beauty. She was distinguished, certainly, a

person of subtle attack upon the perceptions; but he had a qualm as if he had misjudged her after she had spoken to Henry.

Ackworth sat down rather apart from the circle about the fire. Enid Mary said he spent so much time in the open air that he had forgotten the need for and uses of artificial warmth.

After a few general topics had been touched upon, he said, looking to Sarah, "I rather fancy that you and Sir Fenton will find a subject of mutual interest in your position as landowners. You have a model village, I believe; Sir Fenton's life ambition is to——"

"Patch up a bad one," interposed Sir Fenton. "And I am in sorest need of light upon a most—to me, at least—obscure subject."

Sarah smiled a little. "A model village is a tolerably easy matter to arrange, you know," she said, "what we also need are model people to live in it."

"Oh, well, that is out of our hands, I suppose," he returned.

She hesitated. "I'm not sure. Sometimes I think the responsibility rests upon the landowner for one as much as for the other—within limits, of course."

"That sounds particularly terrifying to a beginner. I can't mould my villagers anew."

"No, that is the difficulty, and the weak place in all schemes of the sort."

"Are not your villagers all as model as their environment then?"

"Far from it. There are those who would quit a palace for the dirtiest little public house two miles away. And then there are the born poachers—they prefer that sort of occupation to honest labour."

The others listened awhile as the two compared notes, and Sarah said she would be pleased to write home to her steward for certain particulars she could not give off hand with exactitude.

Then Enid said, "I'm glad *I* haven't a lot of stupid villagers to bother about. Why, *you* must work harder than they do, just looking after them like bothersome children."

She was sitting a little distance from Sarah, and near to Sir Fenton. He turned to her with a smile. "I suppose that's as it should be," he said. "Is it not?"

She shrugged her handsome shoulders and looked into his face. "I should hope not, if I were in your place."

He had been at once struck with the girl's beauty on his arrival the day before, and had even been philistine enough to harbour the passing wonder why Henry need go any farther than his own hearthstone for a wife—certainly he would never get one more beautiful. But now, there was a reshaping of his impressions. Oddly enough, without possessing the unquestioned right to be called beautiful, Sarah eclipsed Enid in the most inexplicable manner; he had to admit it while still admiring Enid's exquisite ivory tinted skin, the rich raven blackness of her hair, her beautiful nostrils, nervous as a horse's, lips of choicest carmine, and a little shell-like ear nestling amid the studied disorder of her curls. At dinner the night before he had imagined what a magnificent success Miss Vaughan would be on canvas, and recalled certain portraits at Burton Stogis Manor—his own ancestresses. Then all the morning Enid had kept him very much aware of her splendid per-

sonality; in spite of her powers of passion she could play the coquette.

But at length the time came when Sarah rose to go. Enid fetched her furs and lovingly handled the soft things once again. Sarah said "good-bye" all round, offering her hand to Ackworth last, when, to everybody's surprise, he said, "I'm going your way, Miss Garland, to pay a call before dinner," and went out with her. The quick chagrin on Enid's countenance set Underwood questioning his slight knowledge of the girl.

The sun had been gone some time, but the southwestern sky still paraded remnants of the pageant of its passing. There were bannerets of softest rose running to flame tinge where extremest ends smeared the translucent sea green, and farther north a hundred shadow islets rested amid an ocean of palest azure. Night seemed exhuming itself from the earth, rising in dusk waves and shrouding objects in a gossamer film, weaving, as it lifted higher and higher, a perfect matrix for each.

Sarah walked briskly as soon as they emerged upon the road. She could not quite suppress a certain embarrassment, caught from Henry's manner of accompanying her. Subtly alive to their relative positions, it was more in keeping with her strenuous ideality of the situation to hold an attitude that was stern in its rigid code of what was permissible and what was evasive. She had the power of emotional martyrdom for the desirable end of exterior unflinching, and she did not know that he had listened to her voice as she talked to Underwood until the urgency to stay near her to the last possible moment had mastered him completely.

They went along in silence for awhile, the exhuming darkness closing about their figures, a film through which they saw all things as unreal, remote, receding. Nothing save the occasional twittering of a late foraging bird broke the stillness, or the far cry of a sheep in some distant nook of the hills. The air was pungent with peat smoke, that, emerging from the straw chimneys, was held in solution by the faint veils of vapour that hung above the marshy fields.

"I am afraid Sir Fenton Underwood has a rather troublesome task before him," said Sarah, at length, anxious that there should be no appearance of embarrassment.

"Yes," he answered, absently.

"His greatest difficulty will be with the people themselves, I am afraid; a village like that wants so much *moral* lifting, the women are slipshod housewives, as a rule—what else can be expected, brought up as they have been? I saw the same thing on a neighbouring estate——"

The light was dimmer now, and the frost was tightening momently; she did not notice a patch of ice where an ill-kept ditch overflowed the road, and she suddenly reeled near to falling. Ackworth caught her by the arm instantly, and she tried to laugh at the little mishap.

But in his present vibrant mood, the touching of her warm body stirred he knew not what of wild unappeased longing, and instead of releasing her when she had regained her foothold he put both arms about her, crushing her to his breast.

"Dearest, dearest," he murmured.

For an instant she too was lost in the moment's meaning to them both, but it was only for a thought's

space, then she strained away from him, breaking free of the encircling arms, her breath rising and falling unevenly.

During a minute both stood without further movement; then something in her attitude gave him an appalling sense of his own degradation. He tried to see her face, not eagerly, but timidly; the subsiding rush of the same emotion that had carried him away made him think to crave her pardon. Its dim outlines brought him the keenest stab of pain and bitterness he had ever known. The pose of the head, the touch, just perceptible, of one crushed under a heavy blow, and the slightest quivering of the lip wrought in him an agony of remorse even as it wiped him clean and pure from the tainting emotion that had swept him off his balance.

It seemed as if they could neither move nor break the ice between them, until slowly a nobler grasp of the situation was vouchsafed him, a perception of her as the means for his own cleansing.

"I won't ask for your pardon—that is impossible," he said.

"Ah," she cried, on a little tremulous sigh, with tears in her voice, and held out her hand.

It was shaking piteously, indeed she was trembling from head to foot. He took it in both his own, clasping it firmly, and they remained thus awhile, she mastering her agitation.

To him it was an absolution, a purifying, to stand thus, in her presence, and the stain of personal shame passed, only the remorse for her pain was left to sting and torment.

"Would you like me to go away now?" he asked at last, without loosing her hand.

"No, let us go on as we first intended," she answered, quietly.

And they went on, side by side, mute, through the thickening dusk, and came at length to Cae'rmynydd gate.

Again she put out her hand, and again he took it in both his own. It was ungloved, warm from her muff, and there was the least perceptible quivering in it still. He drew it to his lips, kissing it twice, thrice; then stood in the deserted road watching her slow ascent of the steps.

Then a tumult of feeling surged upon him, making direst havoc of his late calm. The passing tranquility had been borrowed from her pervading presence; it had purified like a fresh hill wind; at the moment that he had seen his own littleness he had recognised his healer in the one he had wounded. But now she was gone the sense of loss was unutterably poignant; as he stood there in the dark road it wrung him with its agony to blindness, stupidity; he stared upward, catching a glimpse of lighted windows, the black outline of walls, the place that held her, shielded her from his sight. And she was *his*—his by God's divine right of love; and the barrier that divided them was a flimsy rag; he would tear it down; it was only her word to another man, not her heart given away, merely her word!

Again came a breath of healing, either from his own better self, or a wave of memory touching the chord she had struck in him half an hour earlier. Ah—her word! What would her word be to *him?*

He wrenched himself away at last, striding far, forgetful of the hour of dinner, fighting his biggest enemy, the one ever sitting within one's own doors

—his lesser self; waging deadly warfare, risking many defeats, hanging on one foot, torn with desire to go straight back to her, show her the fallacy of her standpoint and the righteousness of love's demands. He would claim her in spite of herself, claim her by the royal privilege of his manhood and her womanhood, nothing *could* stand between them—— He walked on again, pushing higher and higher until he came into the icy draughts of thin wind that is scarce ever wanting on the tops of the hills.

CHAPTER XIV.

SIR FENTON UNDERWOOD, beneath an exterior that told nothing, secreted a certain shrewdness and a good deal of humanity. To his considerable surprise he had alighted on a drama of a sort to touch him with keenest interest and sympathy. His attention had been drawn to Enid when Ackworth had left the vicarage with Miss Garland. There must be something to explain so much feeling, he was sure. When Henry reappeared, late for dinner, pale, and too evidently beside his usual self for anyone to ignore his mood, he saw a yet further development.

Enid had been restless, unreasonably so from the point of view of mere domestic concern for Henry Ackworth, and when at length that gentleman came back she questioned him in quick, almost querulous tones.

"Where *have* you been, Henry?" she demanded. "We thought somebody must at least be dead."

"No," he answered in a preoccupied manner, "nobody is dead."

At which she broke into a nervous laugh. "You do not seem disturbed at the idea—anyhow."

He smiled in a weary, tolerant way, as at the pleasantry of a child. And the colour had flooded

those ivory cheeks, and tinged her white neck with flushes. She looked down at her plate in confusion, as if he had snubbed her. She was ready to weep.

Underwood was heartily sorry for the girl and divined at once that Henry was suffering under some unusual agitation to render him so callous towards the feelings of another, and that one entitled to his most courteous consideration

Enid did not recover her spirits during dinner, though she made valiant efforts to appear as charmed with their guest's talk as hitherto; but it was just this attempt to hide her wound that made it all so pathetic in Underwood's eyes. Was it credible that Henry lived day by day with this girl's devotion under his eyes and never saw it? Once scented, the whole thing was palpable as daylight. Underwood shuddered inwardly. The pity of it! He saw her look at Ackworth once with the panting longing of an animal at bay, every feature lit with absorbed passion. It was almost revolting in its piteousness. What was to happen? Was this beautiful creature's life to be blighted, that wondrous outpouring of her nature to be stultified?

Then his thoughts reverted to Sarah Garland, and confusion was worse confounded. He wondered whether the two young women had yet surprised each other's secrets—he fancied not; the ardency of Enid's nature would hardly let her be on closest friendly terms with her rival. And the other?—how would she take it? But he saw no difficulty there, save the one of distress at standing in the way of another's happiness. Miss Garland was as different from Enid Mary Vaughan as light from darkness; a novice could see that. That wild Celtic spring at

which Enid had drank at her birth thrilled her blood and nerves to a music that had no middle key—either she was wildly happy, or sunk to deepest depths of sorrow. Her beauty seemed the more bewitching as her secret was disclosed; her splendours became pathetic.

There is a type of friendship among men of a rarity hard to define, harder still to analyse, a status partaking both of the intellect and the emotions, striking a fairly even balance between the two in common things, but running to the latter strongly when the other's need is urgent. Underwood's very loyalty to Henry Ackworth levelled his first fine flush of enthusiastic concern for Enid Mary to a pity that lamented her lot rather than resented it.

Ackworth and Underwood set out the next morning for a day's shooting. Enid Mary watched them start from the doorstep. She was due, an hour later, to ride with Sarah Garland. She went upstairs to put on her things. She donned her riding habit slowly and adjusted her hat; then dropped rather suddenly into a chair near the window, placed her elbow on the arm, and her chin upon her hand. She stared abstractedly until tears blurred her vision, and two rolled down her cheeks and dripped upon her habit. As she turned slightly to wipe her face she caught sight of its reflection in the looking-glass. Her lips quivered—how beautiful she was! But when was Henry going to find it out and to admire her as she deserved to be admired, to love her as she longed so ardently to be loved—by him? She had asked herself these questions many, many times, never hopeless that he would awaken at last, but instead, with natural desire fathering the thought, believing

he *must* in the end discover and answer her affection for him. But yesterday, not quite for the first time it is true, yet certainly for the first occasion in a really serious way, her dreams had received a rude shock. Was it possible, could heaven and earth permit such terrible happening to her?—but why did Henry behave as he had done about Sarah Garland? She stared and stared out to the drear wastes of field and bog, blinded by the tears scarce more than by the visions passing in quick succession through her tortured fancy. She had hardly slept last night, thinking, probing the question to its depths. If Henry should love another woman, should flout *her!*

She sprang up at last and paced to and fro. If Sarah Garland loved Henry! The thought burned her. It was terrible enough to fear that Henry had found the young lady at Cae'rmynydd pleasing in his eyes, but with a woman's sense of power, hard as the task might be, she did not despair of winning him back to herself if she had but to count her will and determination against his fancy for another. But if to that were added the dreaded factor of the other woman's love!—then indeed her lot was too fearsome to contemplate. She must find out; she must probe and discover if Sarah Garland had this secret lurking behind her rather sober exterior.

Forgetful of a final glance in the glass she went downstairs at length, sought for her mother and found her in the store-room. She stood in the doorway, in a drooping attitude. "I'm going, mother."

"Very well. I hope you will both enjoy your rides."

Mrs. Vaughan looked after the girl with saddened eyes. She was not blind; she saw Henry's infatua-

tion for their new neighbour, and also Enid's no less strong affection for him. She sighed as she went about her tasks.

Enid rode slowly up the narrow highway. The light skin of snow still remained on the hill-tops and the farther mountains, but the road she was travelling was dark as usual and only variegated by the glint of ice on the pools. She scarce heeded the greetings of the few passers-by, brief though they were; and when she reached Cae'rmynydd Sarah noticed her lifeless manner and wondered a little.

They rode upward to the higher parts of the parish, and passed the lonely hovel on the bog, where Sarah had witnessed the funeral ceremonies of old Mali's son in the early days of her stay in Blaenafon. Onward again and there was the sea—greyish blue, filmed with the lightest gauze of vapour, a few roving clouds blotting it at wide intervals with shadow islets.

Enid was not talkative. Sarah tried several topics, but the girl showed no interest; and her brooding humour grew upon her as they ambled or cantered along the bleak, solitary ways.

Rather suddenly, at a crossing of two rough tracks, she halted and proposed a certain route homeward.

"I don't think I have ever been that way," Sarah said, "and wouldn't it be rather roundabout and long?"

"Oh, the ponies are fresh enough, they can do it," Enid replied, and with sudden inconsequence she started her pony at a sharp canter, leaving her companion far in the rear. When they came together again she laughed rather wildly, and Sarah was puzzled at her queer humour.

There was a stiff hill to climb. The ponies panted, yet Enid, still in an inexplicable mood, urged her animal to almost impossible feats of speed. Sarah hung far behind, too tender for her horse to attempt keeping up with her. So that Enid was much in front when they neared a certain wild expanse of moorland. She began to search diligently with her eyes, drawing the lids low, peering in farthest hollows and on conspicuous summits.

She ambled slowly now, and Sarah came up with her again.

"Did you know," she asked, turning to look into Sarah's face, "that Sir Fenton and Henry were out shooting to-day?"

"No."

"They are. They came in this direction, too."

Her persistent gaze was rude; but she didn't care. She watched the colour rise in Sarah's cheeks, and also saw a sudden affrighted look come into her eyes.

"We might see them," she went on, indifferent to her own smart in the absorbed intentness upon the other's confusion.

It was a tract of country shaped like a basin; the hollow within the girdling slopes was undulating, rush-grown to the knees, and the tall spikes were stained in winter colourings of crimson, running near to scarlet, merging to russet, then by some magic transformation melting to old golds, saffrons, ambers. The riders approached by mounting to the rim of the basin from the outer side.

A dog nosing through the rushes some distance away suddenly scented the horses, lifted his head and barked.

"That's Ruff," cried Enid, quickly, excitedly.

"They are somewhere about," and strained her eyes to pick out the dun shades of their shooting tweeds among the equally dun tones of the landscape.

But it turned out that the dog was doing a bit of hunting on his own account, and had strayed far from his master; for a few yards farther Enid's pony shied a little as they rounded a low curving bank with its back to the wind, under whose shelter the two sportsmen sat smoking.

They came out of cover in considerable amazement.

Enid laughed. "Of course you're surprised," she said.

Her eyes roved restlessly from one to the other as Sarah came up. Ackworth lifted his hand to take Sarah's, but neither uttered a word. The glance that passed between them did not escape Enid. She began to chatter quickly.

"You thought you were secure from all prying eyes, didn't you?"

"We certainly fancied ourselves safer than it has proved," laughed Underwood, with quietly alert glances to each.

"And you were idling," Enid went on.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Yes—we were in no way prepared for company."

"It's delightful to spy upon you," she cried. "*I* planned it." An admission which Sir Fenton's perspicacity rendered unneccessary. He smiled into her face. He couldn't help staring at her—she was extraordinarily beautiful. Exercise had wrought a delicate rose flush upon her pale skin, her eyes sparkled as diamonds, the carmine of her lips was softly brilliant, little ruffles of the black silky hair

played about her temples. Intentionally he kept his gaze from wandering to the others. He rather fancied Henry would be disturbed at so sudden an appearance of Miss Garland; and it might be considerate also to engage Enid's attention as much as possible. But that was not an easy task; the young lady's glances flitted hither and thither with lightning scrutiny as she prattled in heedless inconsequent fashion.

"What have you shot?—do show me. Never mind the blood if there is any—I'm in a callous mood to-day, and can stand anything."

"Nothing!" she exclaimed on a ridiculously high-pitched note, when Underwood confessed to an empty bag. "What will mother say? She's depending on you to replenish household stores!"

Ackworth stood beside Sarah's pony, listening in a musing way to Enid's remarks, and when she spoke to him he looked up to her, smiling in the old tolerant way that stung her to instant bitterness

"You're not very gallant!" she cried. "You don't say that you're pleased to be intruded upon."

"You don't mean that, Miss Vaughan," laughed Underwood.

"Why shouldn't I, pray?"

"Because it goes without saying."

She laughed for a moment, pleased and flattered, then looked back to Henry.

Sarah spoke rather suddenly. "I'm sure you don't want us, though," she said. "Shall we escape now?"

Henry raised his head at sound of her voice, and instinctively she looked down, and there passed between them one of those swift understanding flashings of the eye, and Enid felt suddenly sick and

helpless and ready to cry. She glanced away to the circling rim of low hills that made the horizon for anyone standing in the hollow, and she thought she would remember it to her life's end—its configuration and colouring, and its atmosphere of utter desolation. With her wild emotionalism she fancied it to be a symbol of her future, typical of the barrenness of the rest of her days.

Sarah moved onward saying "Good-bye" in an easy, pleasant way. The gentlemen lifted their caps, and stood to watch the ponies and riders disappear over a rib of the road. Then Underwood looked shyly at his companion. To the man *not* in love, there is ever something rare, inexplicable, in the tremendous sway it claims over his friend.

CHAPTER XV.

"IT'S like a big portrait album," said Enid, glancing to right and left.

She and Sarah walked one on either side of Sir Fenton Underwood down the long picture gallery at the Manor House, Burton Stogis.

Ere leaving Blaenafon in the late autumn Sir Fenton had had numerous talks with Sarah on the subject engrossing so much of his thought—his tumbledown village, and when it was settled that the vicarage trio was to go to Burton Stogis to spend Christmas, he suggested that it would be very useful to him and very pleasant to all if Miss Garland would accept Mrs. Vaughan's chaperonage and also be of the party. Her knowledge and experience in village management was so extensive and thorough.

They had arrived the day before, and the first morning had been spent in a tour of the village. Sarah and Underwood were now discussing one of a number of sad cases to be found there. But Enid was weary of this continual mood of altruism, and catching sight of the gleam of a satin dress, that a passing beam of the wintry sunshine illumined, she exclaimed, "What a lovely frock!"

Henry came up behind them and Fenton called over his shoulder,

"Come along, Henry, we're in luck's way for instructors, I can see. Miss Garland will explain the faces and Miss Vaughan the properties. Now, please, as a first word, *is* that lady's sash yonder—it *is* a sash, by the way?—but is the colour blue or green? I've seen it any number of times through all my life, and never yet decided the question for myself."

Enid held her head a little aside in a considering way, and went near the portrait. "Green," she said at length.

"Green," repeated Fenton. "Very well, so I'll consider it then, henceforth. But I must honestly admit that up to the present moment I *leaned* decidedly towards blue."

"Isn't it the colour of the sunset sky?" Sarah hazarded.

Henry came close to them at the moment. "Exactly," he said, in the manner that should have been commonplace, but wasn't.

Enid turned, drawn against her will; but they were unconscious of her comprehension. And Sarah moved forward at once and stood before the picture of a family group, with the air of detaching herself. Henry began to speak to Fenton; Enid roamed a few yards and also placed herself in front of a portrait. The canvas was faded and cracked, the painter but one of indifferent merit, and the woman in her pearl-sewn stomacher and rich, stiff brocades wore an air of effacement that was not all the effect of the patchy browns and yellows of her face, the black shadows in her draperies. Enid gazed for awhile with scant interest, then in some queer way the vagueness of the

portrait, its remoteness from present living human beings touched her eerily. The poor thing might have been beautiful, as beautiful as Enid herself, and as exquisitely alive, joying in that magnificent brocade, in those pearls, and the dim necklace round the pallid painty neck; the sense of it crept into the girl's brain with weird effect; she half shuddered; poor creature! she was blotted out, nothing remained, no memory of *her* in her lithe maidenhood could be caught from this daubed death's head.

Enid turned, her face expressing whimsical distress. "Why do you keep such a horrid thing as this on the walls, Sir Fenton?"

"That! It is a very famous ancestress of mine, I assure you, and quite priceless from the point of view of family pride, though I admit it was a pity the great lady's portrait was not painted by an abler hand."

"Who was she?"

"Oh, a very distinguished woman of her time, and most wondrously beautiful—Miss Fenton, from whom every heir since has taken his name."

Enid looked at the patchy face once more.

"How impossible to imagine it from *that*."

"Yes—though it isn't impossible to trace the rare beauty of feature; and the dress, I suppose, was very magnificent, and she very proud of her personal splendours. One catches it in the attitude, don't you think so?"

But Enid had no grasp of the thing from an artistic point of view. "She is dead," she said.

"Yes—ages ago."

"It seems so bitterly sad," she stared at the picture again, "to live just for the sake of dying in the end. And perhaps she was old and ugly before then."

"Ah—who knows? We have no record of that."

A servant came with a message for his master, and Sir Fenton hastened away promising to return in a few minutes.

Henry, who had remained a little apart while Fenton talked to Enid, now crossed to where Sarah still stood before the portrait of the mother and her children. It was a Romney. She cast one side glance towards him and then began to speak about it, a trifle in haste, as if eager to leave no gap for other words.

"Is it not exquisite?—the lady's face, so perfectly modelled, and she so delicately refined both in feature and expression. And the little girl with upturned face—the childish contours in contrast with the elder's more maturely chiselled features. But the boy is the masterpiece to my fancy—and how quaint!—the funny little trousers, with side slits at the bottom, and the rumpled stocking. And then the queer little big man's coat with cut-away tails, and the lace collar. And such a decided chin—how like his mother's, the serious eyes holding the sparkle of childish gaiety——"

She paused, scanning the canvas as if in search of further points upon which to expatiate.

"I wonder if there is any portrait of that dear, delightful boy in manhood, and if he bore out the promise of his babyhood—for he's little more than a baby—that's where his quaintness tells—in the expression particularly. I think he would know his own mind, at all events."

Again she paused. He was dwelling upon her face, hearing her voice, rather than the words, in an utterly absorbed mood, and when she was silent he seemed

unconscious of it. She spoke to him by methods so much subtler than speech as his emotion for her was far-reaching, lifting him to appreciations, conceptions of her that were as conquest. None could penetrate that sanctuary of her being and know its innate rareness save himself.

Enid stood solitary; it seemed as if the others had forgotten her; they remained quite silent after Sarah's talking stopped. Enid watched fixedly. Through the lens of her own passion, how she read theirs! It was as an emanation stealing from them to touch her as with red hot iron; her whole nature winced, stung, blighted by the contact. Standing there, alone, her beauty counting as naught, her wealth of love an unconsidered thing, perhaps the girl touched what as yet was her womanhood's height and apex of dignity; for she strove with all her might to keep silence, to let the spell have its fullest sway while she looked on, trying to fancy herself disdainful, too proud to yield one hair's breadth to emotion's untutored craving. She imagined she had been thus restraining herself for an endless time, though in fact it was but moments, when Sarah and Ackworth made a sudden movement, turning as if by mutual accord, to face each other. Then her reserve fled incontinently, her dignity passed, and she was poor, tormented Enid, wildly clamouring for the rights her nature demanded so fiercely. She swept across to them, her splendid physique drawn to rigid erectness.

"How dare you?" she cried, "under my eyes—oh, you have no right—no right to insult me so!"

They looked at her and then at each other, the terrible truth flashing from eye to eye. And she, having uttered her poor little protest, the words of

which she felt in her misery to be too inept to give any idea of the terribleness of their meaning, turned slowly away and wandered along the floor to the spot where they entered the gallery, and so disappeared.

She met Underwood on the stairs and said in a lifeless way that she was going to her mother. And he, stepping into the gallery, found the other two still as statues, a pace from one another, both gazing with the blankness of stupefaction.

Sarah, with a muttered excuse, slipped away and followed in Enid's wake. Ackworth, after he had seen the last of her, turned his white face to his friend.

"Good Heavens, Fenton—do you know about poor Enid?"

Underwood slipped his arm through Ackworth's and drew him to pace beside him. "Yes," he said gently, "yes—I was afraid it would hit you hard to make the discovery."

"It's terrible!"

"Oh, don't take it quite that way—excuse me, but —she is young, may she not get over it?"

"God grant it!"

"Yes, I think so—I hope so. In the meantime, Henry, don't be too tragic against yourself as your way always is. Face it squarely—she's but a child."

"But a child may suffer. And how blind I must have been and how much to blame!"

"I certainly don't consider so myself," said Underwood. "She is impressionable; may that not be her way out of her trouble—to become impressed by somebody else?"

Henry said nothing, and they passed up and down in complete silence for some minutes. Then he broke

out, "It is a most unfortunate contretemps—how can she and I go on living in the same house?"

Underwood shook his head doubtingly. "I still think," he said, "that to make too much of the matter would be cruel rather than kind. And you must remember that the situation is not new to her as to you—she has grown into it; and shall we also hope she may grow out of it. Quite ignorant folk like myself, you know, are very well aware that a first youthful passion is not always of lifelong duration. And besides, now it has come out——"

"By the way," interrupted Henry, "how did you hit on it?"

"Oh, when I was with you, of course. It was under my eyes too palpably to miss."

Henry drew a long breath. "Poor child, poor suffering child! I wonder if I ought to talk to her."

"H'm!" Then after a silence Underwood picked up his broken sentence, "Now it has come to your knowledge, Henry, I'll make you my confidant. I admire Miss Vaughan very much, and I shall want a mistress for the Manor House sooner or later. I'm nourishing the hope that she might perhaps be won over to forgetfulness of her present woe and become content in time to make me happy."

Ackworth halted, turning to survey his friend's face, but said nothing for several moments. Then he walked on again.

"You surprise me," he said at length, brusquely. "I don't think I see with you eye to eye. Wouldn't it really amount to splendid self-sacrifice on your part?"

"H'm! I don't call it so myself at any rate. Don't you see, old fellow, a man in my position must marry

sooner or later, and the sooner the better; and, never having become possessed of the 'grande passion' for any woman, I take it that Heaven decrees in such cases that a man should use his judgment. I can honestly say that I admire Miss Vaughan exceedingly, that I should find the greatest pleasure in caring for her, and trying to make her life happy. I should be ready to be very patient and tender with her while she gets over her sore-heartedness——"

"I can understand all that," Henry interrupted. "I know she would have one of the best of men to care for her—if she could be brought to see it herself. There's where the difficulty will come in. You must pardon my outspokenness in saying that I am afraid I see her difficulty more plainly than you can, and that it will be no easy matter for her to order her ways by reason. Poor child, poor child! Fenton, my position is too odious!"

"Nonsense! I know you'll take it too tragically. You must allow us who are more balanced in every-day matters to judge a little. I'm thinking of conferring with Mrs. Vaughan. Nothing shall be done save decently and in order. If the ladies can be persuaded to prolong their visit after you have gone, Henry—and I shall be so thankful of Miss Garland's services in the village—well, perhaps quite a short time will work wonders. Won't you wish me luck?"

"With all my heart. But—forgive me, Fenton, I can't give you reason to hope, honestly. She has my own blood, you know, I seem to catch her outlook, poor girl, and it must be so terribly hopeless. And her character is not well balanced."

"Now, I'm going to point a moral there for you, Henry—*do* balance yourself. I'm tolerably sure you'll

help her most by dealing principally with yourself and leaving her to others."

They paced and talked until the short wintry afternoon had slipped on to sunset time, and through the stained western window of the gallery the red-gold radiance filtered and made cryptic runes on the dark oaken floor in ruby reds, dull gold, and the vivid yellow of flame.

Sarah went straightway in search of Enid on leaving the picture gallery. Her mind was made up, and though action so speedily decided upon might seem but the outcome of impulse, it was really the natural consequence of an attitude of mind far removed from precipitancy. It was as if it had been suddenly revealed to her that Enid was suffering in a darkened room, and only she could let in a healing ray to lighten the gloom. She was going to tell the girl of her own engagement to John Bennington. She crossed the wide hall and came to the drawing-room door.

Then, swiftly, out of nowhere, a detaining hand seemed laid upon her; as she essayed to go forward, it drew her backward; as she strove to put it aside, it pressed the more authoritatively. It crushed with leaden weight; checking her breath, so that it rose in long irregular swells, and subsided in pants. She covered her face with her hands, halting while hesitancy passed—for she must do this thing. Then came a heat of shame at the revealed cowardice, the subtleties of the pain, and the belittling of the standard she had set up—for Henry Ackworth! She turned the handle and swept lightly into the room.

"Pardon my intruding," she said, quickly, "but I

have something to say, something Enid must know. And it is but right I should speak at once."

Mrs. Vaughan, with one arm about her daughter, caressed the girl's head with her free hand as she looked up.

Sarah seated herself. Enid did not move; so after a moment Sarah laid her hand on her arm. "Will you not listen?" she said. "I have something to tell you that will comfort you, I think."

But the only response was a little sob. So Sarah said to Mrs. Vaughan, "I wished to say that I am already engaged to be married. I have never seen need to speak of the matter before, but having made the sad discovery that Enid counts me as a rival—I thought I owed it to her to tell the facts."

She paused, looking into the fire. She thought her face must be white, by the chill, drawn feeling upon it, and she folded her hands because they were so shaky. She had not dreamed as she left the picture gallery those short minutes ago what was the cost of the errand she set out to fulfil.

Enid slowly withdrew herself from her mother's embracing arm, and Mrs. Vaughan said, "You surprise us very much, Miss Garland," and then glanced into Enid's woeful countenance as the girl dabbed her wet cheeks with her handkerchief. "Does—does Henry also know?"

"Yes, he has known for some time."

"Of course he knows," broke out Enid in her tear-muffled voice, "it makes matters clearer than ever—you would have been openly engaged by now if there had been no obstacle. It simply explains everything—somebody in the background to whom you are tied. I suppose you will free yourself at the earliest possible

moment. Is he at the other end of the world that you have not done so already?"

Sarah steadied herself by a masterly effort. She had the sense of rising out of her body and staring at the shaken tenement. "No," she answered in a voice that did not seem her own, "Mr. Bennington is not out of England."

"Then how is it you never see him? Why has he never been to Blaenafon?"

"Because he is under restraint—in prison."

Then there was a telling silence, and Sarah again looked into the fire.

"In prison!" said Enid Mary at last.

Mrs. Vaughan hastened to say, "I hope you won't unnecessarily pain yourself, my dear. We really have no right to force your confidence."

"I'd rather tell you now, please," Sarah replied, "and then there will be no disguises to keep up. Of course, there was no need until this afternoon's discovery put us all in a false position."

Then she told her story as briefly as possible, dwelling upon no phase of it more definitely than another, and paused at length, a sigh escaping her.

Nobody seemed able to break the silence that closed in upon her last words. The logs on the hearth fell apart, eaten through by the flames.

Sarah got up at last, then stood behind her chair with a hand on its carved back. "I hope this won't make a barrier between us," she said, in a studied way. "Things happen so strangely and we cannot see the future even an hour hence, or we might act differently——"

The sound of another speaking seemed to give Enid the courage to vent the questions burning upon

her lips. "And shall you actually *marry* this man who is now in prison?"

"I am under an engagement to do so."

"Ah!" The girl's responding tone was sharply taunting, "but you will not if you can help it—anybody can see that."

"I have made no attempt to escape the responsibility that my given word conveys."

"But you *will*, you *must*."

Sarah's quiet glance passed over the girl's tear-stained, excited face, with simple tolerance. She said, speaking in her ordinary manner now, for the other's attacking attitude had served to still and regulate her own stirred emotions, "In a case of this kind there are two persons to be considered, and one cannot take action without fullest consent of the other."

"You mean that *he* will not let you go."

"I have every reason to believe Mr. Bennington will hold me to my contract."

"But you would not be held if you could help it?"

Mrs. Vaughan interposed with a corrective word, "Enid, you have no right to press Miss Garland on those points."

"Very likely—but it *is* so; I'm sure of it. Besides, who but a crazy person would marry such a man?"

"I'd rather not discuss that question, if you don't mind," said Sarah.

"Enid," Mrs. Vaughan spoke appealingly, "do control yourself. You are behaving in a very unpardonable fashion."

"Am I?—yes, of course I am. But I *can't* care about that, mother. And he will be out of prison in a year?" she asked, turning again to Sarah.

"Yes—about a year."

"What are you going to do until then?"

"I cannot do anything."

"With yourself—I mean. Shall you stop at Blaenafon until it is time to go and meet him?"

"I hardly know, at present, what I may do." She removed her hand from the chair, and it seemed the signal for her departure. "I think I'll go out for half an hour before dark," she added.

But Enid, eager, irresponsible, caught at her arm. "Wait—has Henry proposed to you?"

"Enid!" broke in her mother.

"I *must* know," was all the reply she got.

"That happened some time ago," Sarah answered as steadily as she could.

"I *knew* it. And you told him what you have now told us, and he is waiting—that is all, for something to happen, to free you. And then——" her face quivered, her eyes filled.

Sarah turned, gazing down upon her. Her own pain made her subtly aware of the other's. But in the larger nature it worked to wider ends, opened instead of closed the deeper flow of sympathy. She stooped and folded her arms about the stricken girl.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE following afternoon Sir Fenton Underwood went down into the village to see how some urgent repairs were progressing, and was surprised to see Enid sauntering along the middle of the street.

"Oh, Sarah Garland and mother have gone into one of the cottages with something your cook made —for an invalid old man, I believe. I'm waiting for them," she said, in reply to his enquiry, when he caught her up.

"You didn't care to go in, too?" he said questioningly.

"Oh, no, thank you. I'm no good as a Lady Bountiful. If there is one thing more than another I can't endure, it is sick people."

"And yet we are all liable to be sick some time or another." He spoke a little caustically.

"Yes, but there are different sorts of people in the world, it's the sick poor that are so gruesome."

He wandered beside her in silence awhile, pondering. He was a little rasped and more than a little surprised that she should so grate upon him. But wasn't she a child yet, and a spoilt child, too? One so beautiful would naturally labour under the disadvantage of a discipline far from exemplary in its

rigidness. From babyhood the whole world seeks to spoil a lovely woman.

They had rambled to the end of the short street without reverting to the former topic. She turned to retrace her steps, but he said, "Shall we scale the height?" meaning a short sharp slope that shut in the village to the north-east. "From the top there is a fine view."

She hesitated, glancing to see if Sarah and her mother were in sight.

"They will see us, we can wave to them from the top," he said.

"It doesn't matter," remarked Enid. "They'll think I got tired of waiting and have gone back to the Manor."

So up the hill they climbed by easy stages, and as they halted the second time, Underwood said, "This is a design to have a private talk with you, you know."

She glanced carelessly. "Is it? What have you to talk about? You'd have done better to choose Sarah Garland. She's a sort of encyclopedic woman —and generally knows something about everything. I'm not clever."

If he had been in love with her he would have resented her tone, her mood. As it was he only deprecated both.

"Well, I could hardly select Miss Garland to hear what is specially and particularly for your ear alone," he said.

She twisted her lips slightly, a bad childish habit.

They went on to the top of the slope and came to the edge of a wide tract of heath. The wintry sunshine lit up the paler green of the turf, and the deeper tone of the gorse, and the russet of dead heather to

softest glory of colouring. Underwood, readily touched with beauty in any form, cried with keen pleasure, "Is it not lovely?"

She stared disinterestedly. "It's almost as bare as the hills of Blaenafon."

"And you don't love them?" he said, dropping to casual manner to disguise a certain little sting of disappointment. Why, after all, was he so unreasonable as to wish she should be one with him in tastes—now. She would grow to that by and bye.

She shrugged her handsome shoulders. "I *hate* them."

"Oh, no, not so bad as that. You're dull there, that's how it is, and so you can't appreciate the beauty of it all."

She made no comment other than a kind of acquiescing smile. Clearly she had no care whatever of her status as a person of taste.

"How do you think you would like this place—in the summertime—say?" he asked.

"Not particularly."

"Not if you owned it, and had the disposal of what it brings in, and the charge of beautifying the estate——"

"I'm not particularly fond of the country at all," she interrupted, always in the same lack-lustre manner. He found it a very difficult barrier to press backward. Either she didn't or she wouldn't see his drift.

"But," he resumed, stepping to her side, so that they stood both facing the same way, "would you not like to be mistress here, to call the Manor home, to be, in short, my wife?"

Colour ran into his face hotly. Suddenly, as if

from the skies, he was pricked with a dart of such pure shame as he had never experienced in his life. Had man ever put that vital question to woman in such inconsequent fashion? When she said in amaze, "Your wife!" he felt that it was forbearance on her part that she did not laugh outright.

"I thought you must be joking at first," she said, "but I see you're not."

"No, I am far from joking," he answered, in a way that caused her to face him more directly and scan his countenance.

But she merely said, "Well, it is a pity you're not."

"Won't you listen while I put it better?" he began.

"I don't see any need to improve a plain question, and all I had better do is to give as plain an answer."

She was oddly abrupt, he thought.

"No, I certainly cannot be your wife," she concluded.

He looked at her closely, and she did not flinch.

"You certainly know the reason, so why did you ask me?" she went on.

He looked away, wondering which was the right reason to give her.

"To begin with," she resumed, ere he had selected his words, "you do not love me."

He winced. It was a stab to be told that. And yet again, before he had chosen what to say, she sped in front of him as a runner who brooks no delays.

"And I do not love you—so where could marriage come in? We're not French, and I, for one, could not tolerate a *mariage de convenance*, big and glorious as it would be to have your thousands

a year to dabble in, your prestige in society to bask in, your splendid position generally to halve with you." She ended on a sigh, and it was that ineradicable trickle of pettiness running as a thread through the nature of the noblest man alive, that gave him speech at last.

"I am sure you would like it—and we should get on well together."

Her little *moue* of contempt was exquisite. He had hardly given her credit for such finesse of expression.

"We certainly shouldn't," she made abrupt answer. "Whatever you might be able to do in that respect would be simply swamped by my tempers. Why, from plain liking you I should descend to bitter hating in less than a year. I should hate you so that I loathed you to come near me—I should want to kill you."

"Oh, no, no, no! I can't think that, indeed I can't."

"I can—because I know. Oh, you do not guess what I have hidden under my beautiful face—you see, I am brazen, I *know* I am beautiful outside, but not inside—oh, dear, no. And I don't care a bit who knows the worst of me."

There was a refinement of recklessness in her manner which gave poignancy to her words. In spite of himself she beat him back, made him conscious of a little dread. But only for a passing moment. Incontinently there stole over him a hungry need of her, a new feeling born at the instant of her repulse.

"Why paint yourself so black?" he hazarded.

"Because I am black. Now, why have you asked me to be your wife without loving me? Tell me

that. It's the biggest insult a man can offer a woman!"

Involuntarily he stepped a pace from her as he exclaimed, "Indeed, you misjudge me!"

"No, I do not. You know perfectly, that as far as mere liking goes, without talking of loving, you think much more highly of Sarah Garland than of me. Why didn't you ask *her* to be the lady of Burton Stogis?"

He had not bargained for these probings and questionings. "I certainly admire Miss Garland very much," he said, trying to assert himself a little.

"But you never dreamed of asking her to marry you—and why? Because Henry loves her, because he hopes to get her for his wife in spite of all present obstacles, and you made some discoveries—among others, that *I* was foolish enough to think of Henry in a certain way, and with his fine sensibilities and all that it would have been painful for him if I did not marry, so you stepped in—it's rather a fine way of sacrificing yourself for your friend—it's more than any other person alive, I believe, would do; but, thank you, I can't regard myself in the light of an obstacle to be cleared out of another's path."

Motherless from his birth, cared for through early childhood by servants, he had lived all his life utterly removed from womankind, and with the easy nonchalance of the wholly ignorant he had ever imagined that the female part of creation was a variant merely upon his own sex. He had not known that, at certain stages of either's development, there were subtlest barriers which held them sternly apart, and the first hint of new knowledge came with stunning impact upon his finer senses. And yet as they stood

in the reddening glow of sunset, the delicate ivory of Enid's cheeks tinted with faintest rose, the blackness of her hair throwing into such striking relief the wondrous glow of her eyes, he was conscious of a swift longing to possess her that had not made itself known to him when he climbed the hill at her side a short ten minutes before.

"It's so clear you do not know what you are asking," she went on. "You have no idea what love is. And you who are master of so much wealth and worldly happiness can never guess how dearly I should love to be mistress of the Manor House, how I delight in luxury, how I should quiver with pleasure at the soft, lovely frocks I should wear, the money I should spend, the carriages I could ride in, with servants running to do my bidding—ah, *you* can never know how dearly, dearly I should love it all, or the price I'd pay to get it—save the one you ask. I'd cringe for it, I'd tell lies, I'd be a hypocrite or religious or wicked or whatever was most likely to serve my turn. If I didn't love anybody, I'd come to you instantly and tell you how I adored you, and what I'd do to make your life one long dream of happiness—for the price you could pay, you know——"

He drew back, revolted in spite of himself, and she laughed as he moved.

"And I daresay we *should* be as happy as lots of people. You would be proud of the way I should shine, and I should be proud of shining, and I am always happy, then. But," she paused, lifting her muff to her face and burying her chin in its soft depths, a childish action that seemed a relic of seven years old, "but love is king of all. I always delight in that story of King Cophetua and the beggar maid,

it was so glorious, she with her beauty—nothing else. But don't you know what a woman's beauty is—what I think it is, at all events?—it is really her love, and that is so grand and splendid it makes a garment to clothe her in so that the eyes of him she waits for may be attracted to her. And even if he breaks her heart by not coming, she still has that wedding garment that she would rather die than let the wrong man touch. That is how it is with me and Henry—he doesn't care for me, and doesn't want to marry me if I were ten times as beautiful as I am, but that makes no difference to me. I'd rather black his boots for him than be a queen elsewhere, and if I did not black them well enough and he scolded or beat me, I should weep to break my heart at his unkindness, but I would not change places with any other woman in the world."

He was watching her. The subtlest of her splendours grew and magnified until they dominated her, even as she had put it, as a garment clothing her. That soul of hers, which seemed so puny in its every-day expression of itself, was all at once a glorified thing by the magic of this one absorbing passion. She touched him as with light, she had spun a halo about herself and he was on its verge. With sudden smarter pang than had yet assailed him he recognised himself as outside that charmed circle of radiance; and a flash of intuition told him that to share it with her would only be possible if he loved as she loved.

They both stared away to the west where the sun was cut in half by a ragged rim of woodland forming the horizon at that point. It slipped to a quarter, then became simply a bright crown above a hidden

face. This finally dropped below the tree-tops, and only broken golden light shone through gaps and clearings. The heath behind them had grown sombre, a little wind whispered among the gorse clumps and heather cushions, sighing into distance; the Manor House was in pale shadow on its slightly rising site in the south-west; the village in gloom. When the last gleam had faded from among the distant trees Enid turned, saying, "It's rather funny I should be speaking of these things to you—I only say them to myself generally—when I'm alone."

He returned her look, but said nothing. In the space of half an hour she had become a different creature to his understanding, a thing undreamt of so far in his career. She struck him as one vivid with life, and life so exquisite, so radiant, transcending everyday existence as the sun the earth. Her words, her self-revelation, wrapt her in a glamour that puzzled, bewitched him. He had not guessed his blindness, nor the sacred ground he boldly dared to tread. He retired, for the moment, not with the honours of war, but as one who leaves something behind as pledge of a future meeting. He had never desired to win the girl with such resolute purpose as when they slowly descended the hill to the village street once more. She spoke at intervals as if she vented her thoughts at interesting points. He remained mute.

"But do you know," she said, as they finished the slope, "I feel as if I liked you so much more than I generally like people—now, this afternoon, since we have been talking, I mean. I'm what they call cold and selfish, you know, I don't care for everybody I come across, as some do. People seem to spread

their love out, divide it up, among all the world. I've got mine all in one huge mass, just for one person."

Under a certain turmoil of feeling, he was conscious of starts of amazement at her frank discussion of herself, of her most sacred ideals, her very heart of life. He began to feel nearer to her in spite of the rebuff his suit had called forth.

When they reached the Manor gate, he hesitated with the irresistible desire to say something that would bind them in a closer tie than the come and go of casual life. So he said, almost shyly, with the reserve of the man who has but just lost the heritage of confidence coming from boyish days, "But we shall be better friends after this, I hope."

She halted definitely, looking at the noble front of the house and then back to the owner's face, and without answering his question, asked another. "Aren't you astonished when you consider my pleasure-loving temperament, that I dare refuse you?"

He hardly knew whence the words had come ere they had passed his lips, "Perhaps you haven't—definitely."

She laughed, gaily, carelessly. "You are going to try and persuade yourself that you are really in love!" she cried.

He turned abruptly, walking on.

CHAPTER XVII.

"So you're going away? I don't see what good that will do." Enid and Sarah walked briskly along the frozen path running beside the Burton Stogis woods.

"It will do no good, certainly, but it will make things easier for all concerned," Sarah answered.

"I don't see that at all—nothing can make anything easier. *I* think you'll complicate the situation by widening the field of battle."

Sarah's fine face, with its high-bred reserves etched in by the generations that had gone before her, contracted slightly at Enid's last words. "Isn't it rather foolish to talk of battles?"

"It *is* a battle, and between you and me, too—none else. *We* have to fight it out—just you and me. So what's the use of you running away?"

"I'd rather we were friends."

"So we are. I don't hate you, I declare. I thought at first I wanted you to die out of my way, but I find I don't now. I rather like you, in fact. I admire you more as I know you better. You're just the sort of woman I'd be myself if I could—but you see we're born in a certain pattern and keep it more or less to the end of the chapter. But I don't hate

you because you love Henry—don't you understand, after all, that I *can't*, that because he loves you—you are different from all the world? Now I could hate you for other things, if I were not too engrossed in something more important. Look at your muff and mine—yours cost numbers of guineas where mine was only one; look at your skirt and mine—if yours were ten years old it would look a thousand times better than mine when new, and I *love* all those sort of things madly, I'd give anything to have the money to buy my clothes where you buy yours, to have that delightful sense of being well dressed—you who enjoy it always can't guess what it's like to be merely longing to attain to it. There are moments of rage when I almost hate Fenton Underwood for asking me to marry him—I could have all and everything I long for—if I could agree—but I can't!" and she sighed.

Sarah said nothing and they went along for some time in silence. It was early afternoon. Henry had gone back to Blaenafon the day before, and Sir Fenton was absent at the market town in the capacity of justice of the peace.

"Where will you go?" Enid spoke abruptly.

Sarah started out of reverie.

"I've written to Jim, and if he can go for a while we'll plan a tour together. If not I shall go alone, and follow my fancy. I shall take Eliza, of course."

"Shall you enjoy it?"

"Oh, yes—why not? I rather delight in my fellow-mortals, and I shall see lots of them and things I have only read about so far."

"And will that interest you?"

"Certainly—I have often dreamed of travelling a

great deal—in the future—and I suppose it has come."

"But you won't be able to forget."

"I haven't any idea of running away from myself, you know."

"Only from Henry. I don't understand how you can do it. Don't you see that I shall take unfair advantage of your absence?"

"I couldn't possibly think of things in that way."

"It's the only sensible way. Here shall I be living in the same house with him, seeing him every day—aren't you afraid? Don't you see what you put into my hands?"

"I really can't see from your point of view, so there is no use in discussion." Sarah's tones were anxiously appealing.

"Oh, well, you must be blind. I warn you, that is all, that I shall lose no opportunity to supplant you in Henry's——"

"Please, please," broke in Sarah, in genuine distress, "we *won't* talk any more in this way."

"As you please. I want to be honest with you. I want you to know the worst of me—that I am not to be trusted—that if by *any* means I can get Henry to marry me—I shall not forbear."

To Sarah's finer sense every word was revolting.

"I know what you're thinking," Enid said, as she climbed the wooden bars of a stile, "that I am simply shameless, that you'd die rather than be as I am. But you forget what a difference there is between you and me. First, I am poor, you are rich, that's the least consideration, however; then you are clever, I'm not; but when I say that I am beautiful I am only naming my one gift—it is all I have. And

sha'n't I use it? Of course it will buy me worldly goods any time; but it can also buy me something else—love. Do you think I won't make the best use of it I know——"

"I *beg* of you," exclaimed Sarah, "I don't understand that way of regarding things—it seems unnatural——"

"Of course, not lofty enough, but then I'm not high-minded as you are, I'm just petty and mean to a degree—I know it well enough. I never pretend to be otherwise. Everybody has got to be what they're born."

Suddenly she turned her head to look her companion in the face. "Aren't you *afraid* to go away, and let me have my chance with Henry?" she asked.

The reply slipped too quickly from Sarah's lips. She spoke in that brief high-bred manner that always gave Enid the idea of being snubbed; the reserve of it often stung her to the quick. "No, I am not afraid."

Enid stood still, looking at her with wide eyes, a little shiver shaking her. Then she put up her muff, half burying her face in it. "I wish you were afraid," she said.

"Sha'n't we agree to say no more?" urged Sarah, walking on.

"What's the use—we're *thinking* about it," answered Enid, following. "And aren't you afraid the least bit? Sha'n't you have terrible times when you are hundreds of miles away—the sea between you and him, and imagining how I am supplanting you——"

"Excuse me, but are you not picturing yourself in another? You agree we are different——"

Enid sighed. "Oh, yes, but how am I to see with any eyes but my own? I wish you were not so sure. I wish you were afraid."

They walked a long way in silence, and turned in amongst the trees at length. Sarah looked up to the stark boughs, noting the silver smoothness of bark here, the knotty ruggedness there, sighting a solitary leaf idly flapping or dangling—a discarded thing that even the wind had forgotten to herd with its brethren. Where beech foliage had fallen in quantities the rich bronze glow filled the atmosphere with actual colour—glamour that touched the eyes with light. Woods in winter held a charm for Sarah that even the tender beauties of spring or the maturing splendours of summer did not consummate; it was elusive, yet full of speaking traits, telling of a nearness to nature's heart and soul, of sympathetic concentration that in prodigal days of output is riotously dissipated in a hundred channels.

"Shall you see Henry again before you go away?" Enid asked abruptly, after a while.

"No."

Again they went on in silence, and Sarah resumed her interrupted contemplation of the trees; the intricate criss-crossing of twigs, the lacy pattern outlined against the soft, dull sky; the air of majesty clothing a mighty elm; the grace of the ash—Igdrasil, princess of the forest; the homely ruggedness of the oaks; the solemn dignity of the chestnuts.

She had decided not to return to Blaenafon when leaving Burton Stogis; and until then she was anxious to stun every active emotion and shut all avenues of compromise. She had written to Jim asking him if he could spare a month to go a jaunt

with her; it was in the nature of casting the die, so there could be no withdrawal. Yet it was well-nigh impossible to forbear that leaping of the imagination that pictured herself severed for many months from all sight and knowledge of Henry Ackworth. She was afraid of that—afraid of the beating desire to fly back to Blaenafon at any cost, at quickest speed; but in the way that Enid Mary meant she was not afraid; she had the gift of insight to see that the fullest flower of love's accomplishment could never flourish in the starved air of jealous suspicion. She knew by an intuition that gave no place for doubt that so long as breath animated Henry Ackworth's body, his love could suffer no shadow of turning; and in that knowledge her life was crowned with a joy that could never know abatement; the silent joy that nothing displaces or blurs; the thing her whole being henceforth would hang upon as fruit upon a tree —she thought often of the golden words to Imogen, "Hang there, like fruit, my soul, till the tree die." But—and there was silence, as it were, in her heart, as she felt her way along a dark path, not so much seeking a goal, as a manner of treading thereon; for all this did not mean fulfilment would come to the heart's great needs—the desire for the beloved's presence, his hourly support of her love with his own, the meeting and merging of two halves into the perfected whole. She divined *that*, and still was not afraid. But tried the harder to sound the very depths of her soul with the quivering plummet of untried valour. And she knew by the instinctive shrinking that here at least was a wholly new world to conquer—and then live in. She tried to scale a height that shone as yet afar off in a light of its

own radiating, the level where she could tranquilly recognise herself as the wife of a man who was not Henry Ackworth, seeing that in the rounded whole of her life's issues, *that* would be unimportant, the only great thing being that she should know herself through all as the same unchanged centre of steadfastness. Involuntarily as she stepped beside Enid these imaginings shaped themselves yet again, carrying thought far from the quiet companionship of the trees, and she sighed unconsciously as Enid's voice again broke the silence.

"I suppose as soon as you see Mr. Bennington again you'll ask him to release you from your engagement."

"That would be of no use."

"But you'll make the attempt—you must—you can't help yourself."

"I'd rather not discuss such matters, but since you put it to me, I certainly should not *ask* any man to repeal my word for me."

"And pray why not?"

Sarah's silence made Enid shrewd.

"I believe I should have to begin all over again to learn my manners and morals before I could understand yours. I don't see *why* you cannot take it back yourself if you choose. Of course, I'm glad you don't choose—or you'd be married to Henry before I'd had my chance. This year of waiting is just what I want to work in. It's my only chance, and it's but fair I should have it. If I win and you lose, you will have compensations in life—look how amazingly delighted you are with a picture, a book, with what people call art and so on. You'd fill up your life with those sort of things if you lost

Henry. But I should have nothing if *you* won. I don't want books, or pictures, or sculptures, I don't want to see them even if they are hundreds of years old and very splendid—they're dead, dull, ghastly—some of them; I want life and love, and oh, so much of it—heaps and heaps—mountains of it."

Sarah smiled, but not with mirth. She was recalling certain bounding moments of her own when under her serene exterior there was the same daring yearning for "life and love, and mountains of it." She wondered how far she would succeed in stilling that sort of thing by "running away," as Enid put it.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN February, after a winter of more than usual mildness and quite an undue allowance of damp, dreary weather, sharp frost set in, followed by snowfall, and Blaenafon and the whole hill country round about was transformed into a phantasmagoria of most elusive beauty. Henry Ackworth, striding through the keen airs of the frozen evenings, or awake at the hours of the bitter, silent dawns, was solitary witness of many a splendour that in past days would have lifted him to that level of subtle appreciations whose motive power is emotional rather than intellectual. In flashes he harked back to that old mood, but it was rather as spectator of than participator in these bygone delights.

His activity was ceaseless; no weather stayed his going to the farthest confines of his straggling parish. He sat in smoke-saturated interiors, and talked in his wonted way of land drainage, of fencings, of fuel-cutting rights on the bogs, of the price of pigs and the scarcity of eggs. He drank cups of pale tea, brewed in the smoke-stained pot ever nestling in its bed of warm ashes on the hearth, and ate the rank salted butter spread thinly (fortunately) upon the huge slices of home-made bread. But the good folk,

with their nicety of discrimination, saw the difference in him, and talked when he had gone of the light in his eyes, the drooping corners of his mouth.

In the middle of the month Eben Lloyd's mother slipped on the ice in the yard as she crossed in her clogs from the house door to the pig-sty, and sprained her ankle. The doctor was sent for from the village-town six miles away, and he prescribed perfect rest and certain fomentations. So Eben must come home, or everything would go to rack and ruin, his mother said. The vicar wrote accordingly and explained the circumstances to Eben, pointing out that it would soon be time to begin the spring tillage, so the coming home would only cut short his stay in the mines by a few weeks.

He arrived on a bright, keen afternoon, and was crossing the yard with a bundle hanging to a stick over his shoulder, when, who should emerge from the house but Enid Mary Vaughan. He was so taken back he hadn't even command of his old-time reserve; he stared at her with a hunger of unrestraint that claimed the girl's instant attention. She went homewards in deep thought. Had she alighted upon the solution of a mystery?—Eben's queer ways of looking at her, of listening if she happened to speak when he was near. It gave her a strange new sense of herself as the truth was slowly revealed to her. She had known for long what it was to love another; but it was very different to think of someone loving herself—even if it were only Eben. Poor Eben! She had little thrills of gratitude towards him, of tenderness touched with sadness.

She had assumed a new rôle of late, had taken to visiting the folk in their homes, carrying little

delicacies in food for the ailing or aged, and was struggling valiantly with the difficulties of the language. Her mother watched her sadly. In her eyes it was all very piteous and pathetic; the power of the girl's passion was rendering her servile in the desire to draw Henry's attention favourably to herself. Whereas he seemed but partially aware of the new order of things. He looked on Enid in the old unseeing way, giving her the half-attention he had always accorded her; only occasionally waking out of absent-mindedness to remember her sad story; and then for a little while he was kind, even tender towards her; but it was the kindness he would have felt for a child, the tenderness that any suffering thing would call up in him. She recognized it with unassuaged bitterness. And she was not so bold and brave as she had promised Sarah Garland that she would be. Instead, she was weak and hopeless, though never less passionate in her love.

Tears gathered in her eyes as she trod over the wide wastes of snow, the tenderness for Eben and her own sorrows commingling to make much that was pathetic to her imagination. The sun lay on the edge of a rounded summit—a golden head on a white bosom; then as it slipped slowly from its momentary resting place its beams ran over the snow in palest rose tints—an actual painting in coloured light on the spotless slopes and hillocks. The dazzling rays struck full into Enid's face, so that she did not notice a dark figure coming towards her from a point at right angles to her direction. She wiped the tears hastily as Henry came near enough to be recognized.

He sighed as he joined her. It was very saddening to know she was not happy—and the reason. It

touched him in a hundred subtle ways, giving him shame both for himself and her. His own love was so incomparably beyond the understanding of a girl of Enid's capacity; there were brief moments when he was even irritated at the contretemps of her misplaced devotion. But in the present circumstance, as was often the case, the moment's pity wrung from him a show of sympathy not strictly in keeping with his real attitude.

"I'm so sorry you are unhappy," he said, rather abruptly.

She winked some fresh tears away. The sense of his nearness and the sound of his voice made her instantly weep for joy instead of sorrow.

"You have been crying," he went on. "Pardon my saying so, but wouldn't you be happier as Fenton Underwood's wife?"

She looked ahead with a little smile dawning on her face—half pleased, half derisive. How was it that he couldn't understand that she was happier at this moment, just to be at his side, hearing him speak, than if she had been wrapped in all the splendours of the world, and loved by another man ten times over?

"Perhaps I am not so unhappy as you think," she said at length, but hesitatingly. She despaired of his comprehension of her meaning.

She lifted her eyes to meet his enquiring gaze, and he, arrested by the pleasure in her face, the little quiver shaking her chin and lips, cried with quick fervour, "I wish I could make you happy."

"You do!" she answered, the light in her fine eyes glowing with intensity of feeling.

"Poor child!" he said, sadly.

"Oh, Henry!" And her head drooped.

He stared, preoccupied, over the soft pallor of the landscape, noting vaguely the grey shadows and the misty perspective, and the elusive shifting of contours that night brings to a snowscape. The western rim of hills was edged with sky still faintly glowing with sunset tints; over the far eastern mountains hung a dim, umbrous vapour, betokening bitter frost ere the morning dawned.

"Perhaps it would be better if we talked it over," he said, after a time, "just faced it, you know, and understood our relative positions better."

"*I* understand now," she answered, without looking up. "It is you who do not understand."

"Let us talk about it, then," he returned, with an attempt at cheeriness.

"It is no use—unless you understand to begin with. You—you do not think I am the same as Sarah Garland——"

He inwardly winced as she paused.

"That my love is the same as hers—that——" She paused again.

There was an awkward silence.

"Henry," she began after awhile, "if Sarah Garland marries the man to whom she is engaged—shouldn't I do—as well as anybody else—to keep your house—and—and—make your life a little happy?"

He stood still, putting his arm through hers and drawing her so that he could look into her face. She glanced into his eyes timidly. "You don't know what you ask," he said.

"I do—I do!" she cried. "I wouldn't ask anything except to live always near you. I'd be content . stay in Blaenafon all my days, and I will learn

to care for the people as you do—and make myself one of them as you do. I could do it for your sake——"

He put his hand on her other arm and drew her closer. "Poor child!"

But she cried out on a note of pain. "You do me wrong. You treat me as a child—it is cruel! Am I not a woman as you are a man? Can you not believe that I feel as you feel, and suffer as you suffer——" her voice broke in anger. But she lifted tearful, pleading eyes.

He was mutely wretched, and ere he had found words to reply she went on, "Give me just one little hope—say that you will let me stay near you. I can do all those simple, homely things that men like women to do—I'd learn to forget myself, and my looks, and be a plain, prosaic body——"

"Enid, Enid!" he said, softly interrupting, "you do not grasp what you mean—you are deluded by your feelings—you would not be happy without love——"

"But I should have it," she quickly interposed. "*I* can love enough for both."

"Ah!" He shook his head sadly.

"Give me that bit of hope!" she pleaded. "I could live on hope—for years."

"Enid, you make it too hard for me," he broke out, with subtle impatience. "What can I say to convince you? But you do not understand——"

Her quick movement stayed his further words. She hung away from him in mute anguish, piteous to see. He reached out and touched her arm again. "Enid, *don't*."

"You tell me I do not understand," she said.

It was the heart cry of a child. She was one of nature's children, but her pain was none the less real to her. He floundered helplessly in search of words, recognizing her point, and his own, and how they faced each other across the distance dividing the poles. Poor Enid! Her devotion was lofty as far as her ideal went. But Sarah Garland's love began where Enid's limitations became her torture—he recognized it and pitied the poor child the more that his own heart could not quell its little uprising gladness.

"We *must* steer clear of false positions," he said at last, bluntly, stupidly.

They walked on a little way.

"Can't you see we must?" he asked.

She was looking far across the white landscape to the dark bulk of a homestead, looming as an amorphous figure in the teasing uncertainty of deepening twilight. In one window a light gleamed as a star.

"No," she said, with deliberation, "I can't *see* things except as I feel them."

He sighed. It was but corroboration of that speech of his which had wounded her. Fruitless as it was he tried to help her to his own standpoint; pity was a scourge driving him to explain.

She let him talk, answering nothing. Her tearfulness had gone; there was a hardness about the mouth and in the eyes as she stared fixedly before her.

"You do not know what a terrible grief it is to me that things are so tangled," he said at last.

She halted and put a trembling hand upon his arm. Her moods came and went, whirling her now one way, now another. His last words had shaken the quiet determination to give no further sign. Brain and heart were in tumult again.

"Henry, kiss me. Kiss me on my lips—once, only once."

The swiftness of his revulsion mastered him, and he stood quickly away from her.

"Oh!" she cried, covering her face, "you are shocked. You despise me now!"

He came to himself out of a wonder of amazement.

"No, no," he said, drawing her towards him again, and bent and kissed her forehead.

They were but a stone's throw from home, and after he had led her to the gate, he left her. He walked fast and far, his whole body of thought gone out to Sarah Garland.

CHAPTER XIX.

WINTER, so tardy in coming, was long in going. The February snows had not melted when March came in, and the farm work, of necessity backward in so rigorous a climate, was more behindhand than usual. Eben Lloyd, picking up the labours he had laid down the previous autumn, found time hanging somewhat heavily upon his hands. For a month after he reached home the ground was too hard to drive the plough into, and so the day's duties consisted of the tending and feeding of the cattle and horses, and the bit of housework he performed under his mother's supervision.

He sat long hours on the settle with the great peat fire at his feet, his mother opposite to him in her spindle-backed elbow chair, the sprained foot in its bandages resting on a milking-stool, whose splay legs, polished with the rubbings of the petticoats of generations of milkers, reflected the flicker from the turves in mirror fashion. Eben had his books about him, and went on with his studies while his mother stared away from the ever-busy knitting-needles to the tiny square of snow-laden landscape which the window framed for her.

And as frequently as twice a week there came a tapping on the door that was so distinctive, so different from any other sound breaking the long stillnesses, that both mother and son started and looked hastily and guiltily at each other. Both knew who was knocking on the rain-washed, splintered old door, with its jagged edge now packed with a cloth to keep out the wind.

And instead of shrilly crying "Come in, come forward," Mrs. Lloyd let Eben get up and disappear round the short wall that built in the ingle-nook from the cold space of the room beyond. He removed the old cloth and unlatched the door, and there stood Enid Mary Vaughan, with fresh rose tints brightening the ivory delicacy of her cheeks and a pleasing smile in her fine eyes as she said, "How is your mother to-day, Eben?"

"Better, thank you. Come in, Miss Vaughan," he replied.

And when he had put the cloth back to keep out the draught he followed her within and fetched the cushioned chair from the parlour and set it for her in front of the fire.

The old woman cast shrewd sparkling glances upon the girl and nodded with much politeness to the kind enquiries after the wounded foot.

"Better, better," she cried, laughing as with inner glee, "but Eben will tell you of the pain I suffer in the night. Sit down, boy, and say it for me."

For he was hanging back in the shadow, leaning against the dresser with the hundred and one jugs catching strong beams from the sun, or the fire, and flashing prettily. But he obeyed without sheepishness and reseated himself among his books, and said

what he was bidden in quiet reserved manner. He only looked into Enid's face now and then, and generally when she was looking towards his mother. He caught her profile that way, and the old story rushed full into his mind of Helen and her wondrous beauty. She had not been more beautiful than this girl of his own blood and country, with the splendours of a thousand hill-women running to one full tide of loveliness in her. His thought never lost colour about her; always in vivid, striking phrase he communed with himself concerning her.

But he was not blind. There were changes in her. There had been happenings while he was absent at the mines. She was not cold and repelling now, but kindly in manner and a little timid at times, as if, indeed, she had found his secret and respected it—and him. His heart bounded then. It would bound as he sat thus within arm's length of her at his mother's fireside; but never a sign showed outwardly —his bovine inheritance of hidden strength served him in good stead.

Sometimes she would put out a hand and finger a book, and ask "How are your studies progressing?"

"Fairly," he answered.

And then perhaps the little coquettish touches would come upon her as she said, "Are you really very clever? I shall be afraid of talking to you soon, for fear you should find out how ignorant I am."

"No fear of that," he gallantly replied.

"There is, though," said she, in the manner of raillery. "I don't like books—not study books." She turned back the cover of one. "What is this now? Something foreign—I can't even read it. Is it Greek or Dutch?"

"Greek," he told her.

"Who wrote it?"

"Homer."

"When?"

"Thousands of years ago."

"Oh, what musty old stuff!"

"No, no," he cried, so alive that she looked up to his face, "there are beautiful stories——"

"Stories?" She spoke incredulously. "Of whom and what?"

His colour rose a little. "About the Trojan War."

"Oh, war is horrible—death and blood and fighting."

"Yes, the war——" he mused, looking into the glowing red heart of the fire, "but there are other things, too, about Paris—and Helen——"

"Helen—the beautiful Helen? I've heard that story, about Paris carrying her away from her husband——" she paused, looking also into the fire.

And the old woman, with knitting-pins steadily clicking together, watched their faces as they thus stared silently at the burning peats, with a gleam in her eyes that was complementary to the quizzical suggestiveness of her lips. She understood a great many things, but as she could not understand what they were talking about, she concluded they were making a little love to each other. The gleam in her eyes brightened.

"I wonder if she was *really* as beautiful as it says," said Enid at last, but without removing her gaze from the hearth.

"Perhaps she was," he answered slowly.

Her countenance fell a little. In this love-warmed atmosphere where she was so easily queen, the old

vanity surged up. But in a moment he redeemed his truthfulness, so that she lifted a radiant, smiling face to him.

He said, "But she was not the most beautiful woman in the world."

"How do you know?" Her face dimpled into smiles.

"Because," he said slowly, "the most beautiful woman was not alive then."

"No?—when did she live?"

"She's living now." The blood ran hot and scarlet in his neck and face as he still stared hard at the turves.

The old woman ceased her knitting, leaned back and broke into laughter, pointing with a skinny forefinger at him, a merry gibe on her lips. She thought the flooding of colour meant that Enid had whipped him with a witticism. She shrieked again and again, and when Enid too looked down demurely, she bent over and touched the girl's sleeve, crying shrilly, "Give it him again, maid—give it him again, dear."

Whether Enid's frequent visits to Bryngwyn had anything to do with the long recovery of Mrs. Lloyd's sprained foot none save the old woman could tell. But when at last the frost partially broke, and the south-west wind fanned over the land and the sun each day ate a portion of the snow coverlet away, fretting it as a moth a garment, until the great slopes and dimpling hollows showed bleached drabs and greens stitched with the white fleece, and the iron earth-crust yielded to the tread of cattle and men and Eben went forth to the ploughing of the fields, she still sat at the hearth side, her foot raised upon the old milking-stool. And Enid still paid her visits—

sometimes plunging through blinding flurries of snow, fighting for her breath with the strangling blasts of icy wind, her skirts lashed about her as a loose sail round a mainmast in a storm. She saw Eben and his team, plodding stolidly up and down the furrows, and the freshly turned brown earth seamed with white lines where the newly fallen snow was lying. He never seemed to be looking her way, yet she knew that he was aware of her coming.

She sat with Mrs. Lloyd and tried to conduct conversation with her bits of Welsh. Sometimes she would sit in Eben's place on the settle, and lean her elbow upon the pile of his books in the corner during the long silences that of necessity were frequent between two who knew little of each other's tongues. The bad foot was the great topic and Enid had garnered quite a stock of terms to use in reference to it. But every enquiry elicited a similar reply. It was better, but not well—far from well. "Most likely," the old woman added with naïve cheerfulness, "she would never be so quick on her feet any more." Enid deplored the possibility, but Mrs. Lloyd herself was very serene.

Then the old woman would vary the proceedings by pointings and admiring remarks upon Enid's dress—her boa, her muff, and the long warm coat with the big storm collar, the pretty close-fitting toque with the bright-coloured wings jauntily set in it. But most of all the muff pleased and tortured her curiosity, and nothing so delighted her as when Enid passed it across to her and she tucked her brown, work-distorted hands into its cosy interior. She laughed with the simple rapture of a child. But she never gave way to these truly feminine weaknesses when her son

was at hand. Enid soon noticed this, and began to understand the adoring respect of this withered, weathered old woman for the tall, handsome young man who called her mother.

When Enid rose to go, Mrs. Lloyd always began to declaim volubly, reaching to farthest extent of her arm, as if to press the girl back into her seat, her voice raised to shrillest pitch. "Stop a bit, stop a bit, maid; no need to go so soon, dear. Eben will be in to his tea in a while—he'll put the horses in shelter for ten minutes and come in and have his tea, and it would please him so to see his mother had company. Stay a little, maid; stay a little, dear," she cajoled.

And Enid, not particularly loth, reseated herself with a protesting glance at her watch, and sat through another silence, until a movement was heard in the yard without, when involuntarily both women looked up and listened as the latch was lifted and steps came towards them. Little thrills of expectation ran through Enid in the moments between the first sound of Eben's heavy earth-laden boots across the yard and his appearance round the ingle wall and his glance into the cosy nook. The old woman could not repress her delight, and cried, "There, now, what a surprise for you, boy!"

Enid watched as he made the tea and cut the slices of bread and butter, and listened to the old woman's quick chatter to him and his brief replies; and one day observing his face with its gravity so dignified above his rough field clothes, an impulse seized her. She caught for the first time that touch of the pathetic in his bearing, the underlying nobility of character graven in those handsome, quiet features.

She leaned towards him smilingly, "Will you give me a cup, too?"

The sense of her power over him gave her an exquisite thrill as he fell a little back, surprised, embarrassed.

"How can I? It is too rough."

"No, it is not rough, only simple," she returned, with a grace she rarely found in her nature.

He coloured, and explained to his mother, who threw up her hands and laughed her shrillest. "Dear maid! Dear maid!" she exclaimed. Then to Eben, "Get the china cup and saucer from the parlour cupboard."

He obeyed and brought the cup, then said, awkwardly looking to the bare table—"there should be a cloth."

"No, let me have it, please, just as you do," returned Enid, and there was that rare smile of hers again.

"Pass me the loaf, boy," cried his mother, "that I may cut her a thin slice. She'll drop one of those of yours on her toes and cry out with the blow."

So he poured her tea into the china cup which was pictured outside with a group of Welsh dames in the old-time tall hat and rosetted ears; and she ate and drank with him and plied him with easy questions meanwhile.

It was not coquetry actuating this apparent freak, but that inexplicable sense of him that had come to her on the first day of his homecoming, when, caught unawares, he had not the art to veil the truth in his eyes. She had no powers of analysis; she couldn't say what it was, save that it was *not* love, nor pity either, rather, a sense of sympathy, perhaps, a reaching out of her understanding to tell him she did not

despise his love, but respected it. The days seemed as far away as another life in which she had scorned him for a clumsy, country youth, and as Henry had put it, "saw nothing but the nails in his boots." In that little-cultured brain of hers she tried sometimes to thresh these things out, but here as otherwhere she could not *see* things save as she felt them, and she felt a pride in Eben Lloyd's love of her. After all, somebody in the world cared for her in that sublime way of love; she was not an utter castaway, scorned by all.

Tardily came the spring of that year. There was heavy snow at the end of March, and the ploughed fields with their dark furrows awaiting the seed were now tracts of Alpine country in miniature. The snow lingered into April, and the bleak, spring winds lashed the bare boughs against the parent trunk with all the biting vehemence of January. Icicles hung from the eaves of the thatch in the bitter mornings, and in hollows under banks was many a wonder-scheme in ice tracery patterned by the water fairies in the cold light of the stars.

So long as the weather remained frosty, Mrs. Lloyd would hear no word from her neighbours who advised her to try and use the injured foot. She would take no risks, she said; a woman of her age must be careful, and so she was still invalid enough for Enid to call upon her when April had come with its wintry blasts. But at last, suddenly, with the fickleness of that most fickle of the goddesses, the weather, the good people awoke one brilliant morning to the phenomenon of genial airs, brilliant sunshine, a wine of wind rippling over the hills, and a stark-naked landscape, without so much as a leaf

to show that spring had come. The utter bareness of every twig and bough cried reproach to the long-delayed tempering of winter's harshness.

Enid, with an old walking-stick of Henry's tucked under her arm, set out to walk to Bryngwyn in the early afternoon. She had her mother's orders to persuade Mrs. Lloyd to try and use her foot a little every day now, and to go into the fresh air, or her general health would suffer. On arriving, by much gesticulation, she made her errand clear, and the old woman was pleased to accede to the demand, and was mightily gratified with the gift of the walking-stick. She smoothed the horn handle with murmurs of approval and polished the silver band with a corner of her apron.

First they made a tour of the kitchen, the old woman leaning upon Enid's arm and the stick, and so satisfactory was the circuit that after a second trial she declared for a turn in the yard without. So through the doorway they went and slowly perambulated the rough enclosure and came at length to the outlet to the fields and halted to watch Eben at his sowing. In primitive fashion, with a cloth tied round his neck to hold the seed, he dipped his hand within and scattered rhythmically as he plodded up and down, a splendid figure, six feet two in height, with a carriage that had been passed to him through generations of forebears who trod the furrow as to the manner born. Yet by some inner power of his own nature, Eben dominated the inherited characteristics of his present environment with subtle force, clothing himself in an impalpable garment of refinement.

As they stood regarding him in silence, watching

the strong swing of his gait, the rhythmic coming and going of his hand scattering the seed, these things became dimly perceptible to Enid. He was, as it were, part of the spring day and the soft glamour of light over the far hills, a part of a whole in which she too had a share—she, half-daughter of the hills. She recognized it without foolish resentment, and saw herself as a bit in the big canvas framed by nature on so magnificent a scale, and quick impulses stirred within her, a gentle pleasure in it all, and such a sharp desire to share it with Eben. "Shall we call him?" she asked suddenly, and forthwith raised her voice and cried musically, "Eben! Eben! Eben!"

The wine of wind fanned across their faces and also carried her call to the ears of the sower. He halted, listening, and it came again. "Eben! Eben!" He turned, though in the middle of his journey down field and crushed over the furrows and the uncovered seed.

She met his big, silent glance with brightest smiling, her eyes gladder than he had ever seen them. The reflection ran into his eyes, too, and he half smiled.

"We have got so far," she said, indicating his mother. "Don't you think we are doing famously?"

Mrs. Lloyd pointed to the stick and expatiated upon its value and usefulness. He listened with the pleased look in his eyes and nodded in acquiescence with all she said.

He laid one big, brown hand on the rough stone post where the gate hung, and Enid, watching his face as he gave attention to his mother, was seized with an impulse. She placed her slim fingers upon his, looking into his eyes with a soft gladness in her own, which changed to sudden fear of what she had done

at sight of the quiver that ran over his face. She tried to be swift with words to hide her confusion, and said timidly, shakily, "The winter is gone. Spring has come to-day—all the snow disappeared from the hills in the night."

Then she slipped her hand away, and looked down to the small shrunken form beside her, and patted the wrinkled fingers on her arm. The old woman shot bright, birdlike glances first upon one and then the other, and cried out gleefully, "Get back to your work, boy. Sow the seed—who knows what'll be happening by the harvesting?"

And with that strong instinct of obedience to a parent which often lasts so far into a hillman's life, Eben turned and went back to his sowing.

When the summer had come and Eben was afield from early morn to evening, his eye sometimes lit upon a white-frocked figure, that in its slender tallness and grace could never be mistaken for one of the natives. It was Enid, perhaps going to call at a house, perhaps merely wandering across the bare moorland patches that dominated the landscape with their dun colouring even in highest summer-time —the arable fields were but oases here and there amid the marshy, peaty stretches, odd scraps rescued by drainage from the surrounding morasses. And he would shade his eyes from the sunlight to watch her, returning to his task when she was gone from sight. He was living in a strange world of uncertain joys. With the keen vision of the one who truly loves another he could but hesitate as to Enid's actual attitude towards him; she was changed amazingly since a year ago, and the change had been in his

favour. But with intuitive shrewdness he caught a glimpse of the truth. Was it not that she herself was suffering, and suffering makes the heart tender to others? He was happiest when she was shyest, hanging back from meeting him, or timidly pleased when she saw him; certain other moods when she was frankly glad to talk to him gave him not half the delight.

Once he asked her if Miss Garland were coming back to Blaenafon any more.

"Yes," she returned, falling suddenly lifeless. "She comes back next winter."

He could have bitten out his tongue to recall its folly as the next words slipped. "To be married?"

"To whom?" she cried, quickly vehement.

And his confusion was so complete he made no answer.

She did not regain her gaiety, and though she had brought his mother a jar of newly-made currant jam, she would not stay to tea to enjoy some of the delicious cream that summer-time brings even on the hills.

He went sadly back to his work. Her manner was confirmation of his fears. It was Henry Ackworth she loved, not himself. Her kindness meant nothing but that she was made tender to him by her own pain. His Celtic intuitiveness gave him no chance of happy misapprehensions, and his nature was too strong to permit the luxury of self-deception.

And so the sun climbed to his farthest point of setting in the northern sky and turned again home, moving his degree southward each day, and soon the hay was filling the whole world with its penetrating aroma, and the bare hill-fields became alive with

workers, men with scythes in the old-time way, and women with wide wooden rakes.

To Enid life was alternately a dream or a piece of realistic enduring. When would the slow months bring Christmas again and the return of Sarah Garland? At wide intervals a letter came for her—but no address given, always the letters must be addressed "Poste-restante." And in these epistles Sarah sent kindest enquiries concerning Mr. Ackworth—nothing more. For Mrs. Vaughan were affectionate messages, graceful recollections of incidents happening during their mutual acquaintance, and to Enid herself she told of the hundred and one things strange and interesting that came to her notice in her travels. Jim's holiday had come to an end, she said, in June, and he had returned to England, so she was alone save for her faithful duenna, Eliza. "And as she roundly abuses every item of existence in these unfamiliar countries, I am afraid she is not benefiting by her experiences."

Every word hurt Enid, and she never did more than hurriedly read through the letter and immediately burn it. She replied in a cursory manner, saying there was nothing to tell of Blaenafon—things were precisely as they always were. "There has been one funeral since you went away," she wrote, "and three new babies have arrived. The doctor has passed the Vicarage twice in three months, but he must have been going somewhere distant, as we haven't a single sick chicken in the whole parish brood, at present. We are still in the middle of harvest, though it is late September. Sir Fenton Underwood comes next week."

CHAPTER XX.

FENTON UNDERWOOD observed Henry Ackworth keenly during the first half-hour after their meeting, then made a mental comment. "It's wearing on him." He held Enid's hand with lingering pressure, scanning her with a gaze that was only half-critical. She seemed surprised and flushed very charmingly.

"Miss Enid is even more beautiful than she was a year ago," he said to Ackworth, when they lighted their cigarettes after dinner.

Henry, with the weight of the girl's disappointed life ever present to him, said sighingly, "Poor Enid."

"Don't discourage me by that attitude," the other returned.

Henry looked towards him.

"Yes," nodded Underwood, as if he had spoken. "I'm in deadly earnest this time. It isn't a clearing her out of your path, as she put it herself. What hope can you give me?"

Henry gazed silently to the dim landscape beyond the bounding shrubs of the garden. "God knows how it will work out," he said, despondingly, flinging the newly lighted cigarette away irritably and thrusting his hands into the pockets of his evening jacket.

Underwood glanced at him thoughtfully before he

said, "Old fellow, this is wearing on you—terribly. I ought to have looked you up before."

Ackworth made no comment. His friend flicked the ash from his cigarette, adding, "We're selfish mortals; I've been putting myself through my paces with such pertinacity and diligence I've only half remembered other people and *their* affairs."

"If you'll stand it," he resumed after a moment's pause, "I'll tell you about things—may I? You remember my idea of proposing to Enid, and how it came off—unsuccessfully? Well, she said one or two things that put me in the shade—desperately, and so, in consequence, on my mettle too. She told me point-blank I had no love for her, and did not mince her language in saying I was anxious to sacrifice myself for your sake—in fact, spoke plainly enough for the plainest man to need no further explanations. She hit straight home, and I never felt so decidedly in the wrong box in my life. I had some bitter self-searchings after it. I'd no idea before then that I had any pride in such matters, but perhaps it's a universal law of nature for a man to resent being twitted with the lack of certain big emotions—I don't pretend to account for it, but it hurt at the time as if a moral sense had been destroyed. Yes, Miss Enid twitted me roundly for presuming to take the pose of a lover without first acquiring the necessary qualifications. So I resolved on a course of investigation. I saw things differently, or rather *felt* them differently before I parted from her that day. She stirred some new bit of me that had slept hitherto, and positively I really *did* want her for herself after that."

Ackworth stared fixedly before him, and when

Underwood paused, gave no sign that he was listening.

"The last eight months," Underwood went on, "I've been studying this matter of marriage from such a standpoint as I am able to get at, and have come now with very different weapons to win Miss Enid. Not, my dear Henry, that I pretend for one moment that this grand passion is with me as with you—far from it, mine's a very commonplace affair beside yours, the same comparison that holds between us elsewhere; I suppose a man moves on certain lines in every phase of his experiences. Your feeling for Sarah Garland is as a magnificent picture, a splendid poem, or a masterpiece in music—it just carries all before it, and even the onlooker gets a glimpse of that which he cannot understand, something that uplifts him out of himself for the time being."

He paused, musing. Henry rose suddenly, and began to pace up and down. Underwood leaned back in his chair and went on evenly, "and though I know full well I am not of *that* order, but simply a plain man with a plain affection to offer, I'm hoping Miss Enid won't say me 'nay' a second time. What do you say to my chance, Henry?"

"Nothing—nothing whatever," was the brusque answer.

"You don't give me any hope?"

"Very little."

"Why? Can you tell me?"

Ackworth came to a standstill at the table's edge.

"Fenton, the poor child offered herself to me—pitifully—begged—oh, it bit into me like fire—it makes life unbearable—intolerable—and she's going about among my flock, tending them in their little

sicknesses and so on—it's heartbreaking." He began to pace again. And there was silence until Underwood said rather quickly and in another tone:

"Henry, you're all unstrung, you've been letting things wear in on you fearfully; you must come out of this idyllic spot; it's no place for a man to fret his heart away in. When are you going to take my advice and come out into the world and fill the empty place now awaiting you? You're the man with his talent in a napkin, at present."

Up and down Henry strode, answering nothing. At length the other got up, went to him and slipped an arm through his and led him to the window. "You're like a creature in a cage, man. You've got on your own nerves to a pretty pitch. You've *got* to get out of this."

"I can't—yet. You see, Fenton, it's this year's waiting——"

"Yes, yes. Have you seen her since last Christmas?"

"No."

"Nor attempted to do so?"

"No."

"I confess I didn't give you credit for taking it so literally—her embargo of silence and separation, I mean."

"Don't you see I've *got* to take it so?"

"Well—I don't know. I can't pretend to dive to your soundings of things, old fellow. I go so far, and then think I've got bottom—it *is* my bottom, but not yours necessarily."

After a pause he said, "Look here, Henry. Can't you face the *possibility* of her marrying this Bennington?—just as an argument."

Ackworth stared hard into the darkness ere answering: "Don't you see that is what I *am* facing—the possibility? Or rather, it faces me whithersoever I turn to 'dodge' it," and he smiled a bit grimly.

A few stars studded an ocean of sky as ships becalmed, and mountainous heaps of pallid cloud hemmed in the ocean. Underwood looked up and saw the pricking points of light, and the faintest radiance tinging the grey vapour masses. "If Henry had been a weakling," he was thinking, "it would all be comparatively simple, but when a man carries his strength into the weakest part of his nature, he becomes an irrational creature."

"Henry, what about a man's fate? Some must have monkey's allowance, you know—more kicks than ha'pennies, and it isn't dignified to howl."

Ackworth laughed suddenly. "Yes—I'm howling fearfully," he said.

"That's the wild hill blood in you. But you're an Englishman as well, remember. And if every Celt is a poet from the plough-tail upwards, an Englishman is a philosopher over the same wide area. The Celt has got the upper hand in you at present. It's this idyllic environment—it's narrowing all round—this business of the parish priest on a hill-top——"

"I grant you that," interposed the other. "I've got so far in self-education. I'm not a priest in reality—it's just idealism—my post here."

"Precisely. Thank Heaven you've arrived at the conclusion at last. You're a racer doing a cart-horse's work. You've got powers the world wants badly, and here you are in an idealist's seclusion, living on sunsets, and sunrises, the picturesque in a mountain man's speech, and the humour in his wife's eye——"

"Yes—I'm feeling my way out."

"Thank God. A plain man most ably appreciates his betters, you know, and you're the sort, Henry, to go and preach Crusades. Think of my poor village, and then remember it's but one sore among ten thousand. Think of the work there is in the world *crying* to such as yourself to do it. Of course I know you might be a bishop and as a Right Reverend Father in God you would also be a father in Israel, but—look here, I've got money, and aspirations I can never attain to myself, but *you* could do so much. We ought to make a compact, you and I——"

He paused. Ackworth was walking to the far side of the room. Underwood smiled when the return journey brought his friend face to face again. "I suppose a compact with me isn't possible just at present."

Ackworth came to a standstill, staring at the floor. Then he took the other's arm and they faced the window again. Underwood saw that his eyes glistened.

"You've got to wait for the verdict?" he said.

Ackworth nodded.

"Miss Enid, should you count my company an intrusion?"

Enid, in walking-dress, stood in the hall, fastening her gloves.

"I shall be glad of it," she answered, selecting her black-thorn stick from the stand.

He reached his hat, pondering the question of her manner. It was different in kind as well as degree from her bearing of less than a year ago. She had lost almost all that whimsicality of tone and pose;

she was much more womanly, and certainly more charming. Her beauty, always striking, was perhaps less assertive while attracting with greater subtlety. He assuredly wished to win her for herself now.

"May I carry that basket for you?"

"If you do, please don't bump it anywhere—there's a blanc-mange inside"

"For wayside refreshment?"

"No—for an invalid child."

"Ah!" His eye lighted up. "You *are* a Lady Bountiful, after all."

She coloured a little.

As they stepped into the sunshine he said, "You know, I have the firmest belief that every woman at heart is really a Lady Bountiful."

She smiled. "Of course you are twitting me with some of my bygone sayings."

"No—only reminding you, and taking it as a short cut to what I wanted to talk about. You haven't forgotten our talk last Christmas on the hill above the village of Burton Stogis?"

"No."

"I want to—shall we say, revise that conversation. Can you recall what you told me?"

"Broadly—yes."

"But do you remember your hardest saying?"

"I can't tell which you thought the hardest, of course."

"You said I had no affection for you."

"Was it not perfectly true?"

"Not 'perfectly' true—only partially so."

"Then, in effect, it was correct."

"Yes, in effect—from your point of view. But could

you believe that it would be manifestly untrue, if you said the same to-day?"

She didn't answer at once. "I don't quite see how it could make any difference," she said at length.

"Ah, but I want to prove to you that it must make all the difference in the world. To begin with I'll confess that in the main you were right when you said I was insulting you by an offer of marriage——"

She broke in with a little laugh. "That was rather rude, wasn't it?"

"Well—we won't look at it that way; after all, the truth shouldn't be classed as rude save in very special cases. Shall I go on? Then I may as well finish with the beginning and say I want to renew my proposal with the difference that I *have* an affection for you—an honest affection—I want just you, and nobody else out of all the world for my wife."

She turned her head to look at him, an open questioning gaze.

"There is no need for me to tell you how beautiful you are, and all that sort of thing," he went on hurriedly, her quiet searching of his face rather disconcerting him.

"But," said she, a humorously tolerant smile running over her lips, "I should want you to tell me so—if it mattered."

"If it mattered?" he repeated, questioningly.

"If I were going to think of you as a lover."

"But won't you?"

"I can't."

"I must be a thumb-fingered suitor, I'm afraid," he said.

She laughed gaily. "That merely proves that you are a self-deceiver."

"Do explain."

"You'd know by instinct what to say and how to say it if——"

"If I were really in love with anybody—that is what you mean. Well, I can say honestly enough that I am under that impression myself."

"Or delusion," laughed she, with archness.

"Look here, Miss Enid, shall we not sit down on that bank yonder and thresh this matter out. You simply put me into the shade too cruelly."

When they were seated he said, "You give me the credit of believing in myself, don't you?"

"Certainly—as far as you go."

"That's another hit—oblique, isn't it? Does a woman always hit sideways and punish so?"

"I'm not clever enough to know."

"Well, to proceed, to *me* it has become quite the biggest hope of my life that you will be my wife. Surely you can forgive me not being a violent lover at first sight, though you must positively accept my word that I admired you exceedingly the very instant I saw you. I had never so much admired anyone before."

She leaned back against the mossy turf of the bank and played with a spray of bluebells nodding in the faintly moving air.

"I believe everything you say," she said, and looked quickly to him with a smile, "and appreciate it too, but, one must be honest with one's self."

"I suppose I'm really too prosaic to make myself understood," he said.

"That might equally mean I am too stupid to understand," she returned. "But it isn't either. When we've taken the blanc-mange to that white

house on the skyline there, will you come with me and call at Bryngwyn—Eben Lloyd's home?"

"With pleasure."

"Then we won't delay longer here or we sha'n't be back in time for tea."

As they got up she added, "And we won't talk any more of this particular subject until we have been to Bryngwyn, if you don't mind."

"Very well."

Fifteen minutes brought them to the house of the little invalid. Enid made a five minutes' stay, and then they crossed country in the direction of Bryngwyn. Enid scanned the fields as they came near the house.

"There is Eben," she said. "We'll go that way and pass through the field, and talk to him a few minutes—do you know Eben?"

"No. When I was here last autumn he was away, I heard."

"Oh, yes, working in the coal mines."

Eben was mowing a field of oats, his body rising and falling with that perfect rhythm which inborn adaptability gives. When they came near him he stood upright, a slight embarrassment showing in eye and lips.

"Good-day, Eben," greeted Enid. "We're trespassing on your land as a way home from the top there—Plasnewydd. This is Sir Fenton Underwood. Mr. Eben Lloyd."

Underwood scrutinised the young man sharply.

"Will you go to the house?" asked Eben, using the invariable question to any comer.

"Not to-day, thank you, Eben—we sha'n't have time to stay for that. How is your mother?"

"Quite well. Her foot is so sound now she forgets

the stick half her time. But she won't give it up—on account of the dignity it confers."

They laughed. Eben stood very erect, clad simply in the grey woollen shirt, open at the throat, a waistcoat, also loose, and corduroys many times washed. Through the broken crown of his battered straw hat a wisp of his black locks peeped; his bronzed skin was the colour of ripe hazel nuts, his hair waved easily about the temples and ears.

"What a splendid fellow!" exclaimed Underwood, after they had left him. "And little of the rustic in his manner."

Enid smiled. "Now we have seen Eben," she said, "did you notice anything?"

"Yes, being somewhat warned I observed him closely."

"Then can you understand when I say I would prefer to marry Eben—rather than you?"

"It's one of the things one has to accept, I suppose," he returned.

"But if you could understand," she went on, "it would make everything so plain. You see Eben loves me, so I could marry him—if I married at all. It would content me, in a sense, it wouldn't be *all* blank desolation—*do* you understand?"

"Wouldn't my love be as satisfying as Eben's?"

"It isn't the same thing in the least."

"Oh, come—in what does it differ?"

"I'm not clever enough to tell you; but there's all the difference in the world. For one thing he couldn't talk about it as you do."

"Well, no, perhaps we might count a little difference—*there*, naturally. I presume you don't wish him to, you don't *want* to marry him."

She looked at him, quizzically for her. "I used to think of Eben in that way," she said.

"Which way?"

"Oh, a snob's way—I'm an awful snob at bottom. I find things out, you know, by contrasting myself with other people. Henry isn't a snob, Sarah Garland isn't; I didn't think you were either."

He burst out laughing. "If I felt you were right I shouldn't be able to laugh, thank goodness," he cried.

"Well, that was how you put it—that Eben couldn't express himself with sufficient delicacy on such a subject, whereas, as a matter of fact, I know quite well he would leave you far behind in eloquence."

"Oh, well, I never aspired to anything so distinguished as eloquence."

"You'd fall far short, if you did. As the preachers say, you haven't the root of the thing in you."

"Well," he sighed, "mine's hard luck. You simply won't believe in my sincerity, then?"

"Oh, I believe you to be sincere enough—as far as you go, but the thing is you don't go so far as you think. And don't be mistaken and think I am ungrateful—I'm really very grateful, and I like you—well, perhaps I might say something stronger than 'like' only you'd misunderstand; and I think if we married we should agree splendidly——"

"Then in Heaven's name——!" he burst out.

"And," she continued, "I should be as happy as I am ever likely to be, and you'd be content, and in fact, we should make a very satisfactory couple, marriages of that sort are really very sensible—only —I don't want to be married on those terms."

He looked into her face and laughed a little.

CHAPTER XXI.

ENID would have preferred to remain at home. As the year waned and the time for Sarah Garland's return to Cae'rmynydd drew ever nearer, a subtle unrest filled her thoughts. In her heart of hearts she knew the return could mean nothing in her own life, that whether Sarah Garland came or remained away, whether she married one man or another, Henry would still be as far removed as the stars from herself; and yet, knowing all this, with the ineffaceable insincerity of the superficial mind, she dwelt on vague possibilities—the turn of events in impossible directions, the unexpected happening that should metamorphose the whole situation.

But Mrs. Vaughan accepted Sir Fenton's invitation without consulting her daughter, and early autumn found them at Burton Stogis. Henry remained alone in Blaenafon.

He and Underwood parted mutely. Both understood that the time had come when there could be no more confidences—Underwood did not even ask his friend to accompany Mrs. and Miss Vaughan. And when Henry had seen the last of them, he gathered the reins in his hand and turned to his

solitary drive back to his solitary home with a sigh of intense relief. He wanted to be alone. If it had been possible he would have liked to remain apart from every other of his kind until he had met Sarah Garland again—and the man Bennington. Sometimes he pondered the situation as a drama with three actors—Sarah Garland, himself, and the yet unseen Bennington, until this man in prison, this hidden yet all-potent factor, became as an invisible horror, a grim, dark thing playing its part behind the veil of its own secret power. The subtle sense of this man he had not seen, who had fallen from the path of common rectitude, branded by the law of the land as a criminal, who now herded with criminals, occupying his days in menial tasks under watch and ward, grew upon him until the mere remembrance was nightmare. But it was not the picture of the convict nor the knowledge of his slipshod morality that touched with the sting of hot iron, but the thing behind the veil, with its splendid power of casting the die for another's happiness or despair.

Henry Ackworth winced at moments, appalled by his own moral decrepitude when the rise and swell of hatred towards a fellow creature ran to the fine edge of exquisite revenge—if his hate could kill, how the other would have been slain, cleared from his path, and his every pang avenged! But he was small as well as great—as all men are—only by turns. Sitting long hours on some lone hillside, staring to the blue distance of an autumn day, or to a wall of pearl-grey vapour that shut him within a very little world, he fought battles, and conquered, stayed to rest in the rich peace of pain assuaged, only to fall incontinently to fresh need of combat with less vigour for victory.

This man, this Bennington, the convict! Could he know how he had become Fate to another man—would he exult over his power joyously? Or would it be that the very greatness of his place and potency stirred the deeper depths that exist in every soul—would he perceive his own greatness in the supremity of sacrifice? Ah!—The reflex action of the image smote the thinker hip and thigh—it might be that *he* was the one called to sacrifice, he for whom it must be the greater as his love for the woman exceeded the other's a thousandfold. And after these ploughings he tried the sowing of seed, the seed of an exalted resolution, but the harrowing seared and scarred. Could he give up Sarah Garland and still retain his level of moral sanity? As the weeks passed he lived as one imprisoned in a space that lessened hourly, the walls closed in on him with tantalising slowness and sureness.

Meanwhile with admirable skill and a forbearance that rarely let Enid into the secret, Sir Fenton Underwood went on with his wooing. It consisted largely in the (apparently) discourteous rôle of an absentee host. He had many concerns afoot, his presence was constantly called for in various places, and he made no bones about following his day's business and leaving his guests to themselves for the most part. Then several of his friends came down for a few days' shooting, and he left Enid much to the gallantries of the youngest of the party, a lad of nineteen, instantly fired with boyish adoration of her splendid beauty. And when he was in the girl's company his well-carried airs of removed intimacy served his purpose nicely, even going so far as to pique the young lady's vanity at times. They rode together on fine

days, and then he always had somewhere to call, and "would she please go round by such a route with the groom, and he would join her at a certain point?" She pouted a little on these occasions, but had the consistency to disguise the petty chagrins—after all, she must not allow him to think he could vex her or that she depended at all upon his kindliness and attention for the agreeable passing of her days. But it *was* pleasant to be a petted guest at a big house, to be somebody of importance in luxurious environment—she had to confess so much to herself. She even grew to like the picture gallery with the faded Miss Fenton forever gazing from the wall, and the Romneys and Reynoldses that gave her no pleasure merely as works of art; she began to appreciate them for what they represented, the part they played in establishing the owner's status. She walked there on days of bad weather and looked from the western window over the great park and the far woods behind which barbican the sun slipped from sight. Then, pacing in the dusk, she would let her fancy run riot —of what it would be to be lady of the Manor, to wear white satin and the Underwood jewels and be painted by a great painter, and then shine upon these old walls, outvying the famous Miss Fenton with all her bygone glories, and remaining for other days—a beauteous creature for future generations to admire and talk about. And then, perchance, with swift transition her thoughts fled to Blaenafon, to Bryngwyn kitchen and Eben among his books on the settle. Then she sighed.

One afternoon, crossing the gallery in the dusk, Sir Fenton came upon her unawares, and showed his surprise.

"What! With my gloomy ancestors. I thought you detested them, Miss Vaughan."

She didn't quite like his tone—wasn't it a trifle too brusque, too far removed from his attitude of some weeks ago, in Blaenafon fields? She liked him to be deferential and all that sort of thing; it greased the wheels of life for her pleasure-loving soul, made her feel part of this stately living. She laughed and made no answer, and he went on his way, merely saying, "Aren't you cold, and won't you come down and give me a cup of tea?"

"Oh, mother will do that," she answered, the hurt and the retaliation running together swiftly.

They had been at Burton Stogis three weeks when Enid got a letter from Sarah Garland—Henry had readdressed it from Blaenafon. Sarah was thinking to be back at Cae'rmynydd by Christmas. She was so longing for the quiet and solitude, she said. She wanted to see those great wastes under snow again, and to trot over the hills on her pony "with the biting hill wind in one's teeth." "Because," she went on, "most likely I shall be going away for good—in the spring, perhaps, and I should like a short spell there before I leave it forever." In this veiled way she gave Enid her confidence—if the girl had intuition enough to take it.

Sir Fenton Underwood preserved his character of discriminate friendliness to the end of the visit. Enid, amid other more anxious thoughts, could not help remembering his bearing a little ruefully as she sped away from the luxury of Burton Stogis Manor to the bleakness of Blaenafon Vicarage.

But no sooner did she see Henry than she forgot

Burton Stogis and all it meant. He was haggard and silent. All the old passionate longing surged up in her anew, the longing to be first with him, to have the right and the power to charm away his cares, to provide him delight in her own beauty, in that mystic relation that exists where one finds all the world's joy in the other. And his desolation was for another woman! She fought with upswelling sobs; it was as the beginning all over again; she could have flung herself into his arms, shameless, begging him to love her and find consolation in her alone.

It was a pale, bleak day, not drab with the ruddy tones of autumn to strengthen and brighten, but wan, pinched as the face of death, the landscape dry, withered, imagination depicted wrinkles in its parched features. In Enid's emotional mood she saw the whole as an arena for coming tragedy, she was gifted for the nonce with imagination, and compared her own foreboding of loss of hope and love with the dominating note of desolation in her surroundings.

She did not see Eben Lloyd until she had been home more than a week. She was too engrossed in the more personal nature of her sorrow to give him thought now; and he, knowing she had returned, did not dare make any effort to see her; the initiative must come from her—he hardly explained why, save that his love was wholly wrapped up in his pride, and he would not belittle himself lest it reflect on her. If she were content to wait a month before seeing him, he must be patient. She came upon him by accident at last; met him on one of his out-lying pastures as he counted the cropping sheep. He was struck at once by the aimlessness of her attitude, the

disengaged air. She greeted him with wan smiles and no enthusiasm.

She had been on an errand to a distant farm where there was a new baby; carrying a little present from her mother. It was not an interesting mission, for she was invited to view the newcomer, and as she had no interest in babies, and this one she thought the ugliest that ever was born, she was glad enough to get away and be free to think her own thoughts again. Eben stepped into her ken rather suddenly—she heard a loud halloo to a dog who was too zealous in the performance of duty, and it was Eben who stalked across the short grey-green wintry turf, pushing knee-deep through the rushes in his great boots and black gaiters.

His greeting was tentative in quality, a little more reticent, even, than usual, as if he gauged her mood to regulate his own.

"So you haven't gone to the coal mines this year," she said.

"No—my mother is unwilling—but I wish to go myself."

"I suppose she doesn't like to be alone?"

"That is it."

"I must come and see her one of these days. Shall I try and persuade her to let you go?"

He smiled slightly. "She is very obstinate."

"But she must not stand in your way. She must remember your future."

He looked at the nibbling sheep, a faraway reflectiveness in his eyes, and said nothing. Her tone hurt him, it had no warmth, her smile no winning sweetness; she was beautiful always, but that little appeal in her manner that had been so very dear to him in

the past months was lacking now. There had been times when he had almost thought she wanted his love, that she appreciated it and his attitude towards her.

Now she seemed to have lost interest in his personal concerns, and said the weather was wretched in the tone that meant life was wretched, too. When she went on her way he stared after her instead of counting the sheep.

When smoke once more rose from the chimneys of Cae'rmynydd, Evan Pugh was in haste to know the reason of such sign of life and occupation. He met Enid on the road riding her pony.

"Indeed, Miss Vaughan, you been missing that Miss Garland as lived at Cae'rmynydd a year back when you want to go riding on your pony. I says to that woman o' mine many's the time I seen you together as you made a picture fit for a hexibition, same I seen once in Cardiff when I was on a coal boat, and a black job it was, too, and made it a lot o' trouble to clean yourself up for church o' Sunday. What I was sayin' though, when I see smoke coming out o' the chimneys, as most like she was comin' back again after travelling round the world as I heard tell of her from Thomas Pontnewydd, as the house belongs to?"

The pony dipped its head to the bank to graze. Enid let the rein fall loose. "Yes," she said, "Miss Garland is coming back."

"Then that woman o' mine 'll be fine an' glad, I can tell you, for they'll want milk again and was very good payin' the coppers for it, never wanted to have a thing for nothing. There'd be a couple o' shillin's a week for the poor thing's pocket when Miss Garland

was at Cae'rmynydd, and may be again, no doubt, with a chicken at times and eggs, and good prices for 'em. I made out by the way she spent money as she was a rich young woman."

"I have a message for you from the Vicar," said Enid, "that is why I stopped. He wishes to see you some time this afternoon before four o'clock."

"Oh, ah, yes, I know what he wants, to be sure. What's going to happen with the Vicar when Miss Garland comes back—eh? There was plenty to say as it would be you, miss, as the Vicar 'ud marry, and very shuitable, too, I told 'em, when it seemed the wind come out o' that quarter, but then I says to 'em as the Vicar wanted a more plain young woman than you, miss, you being so beautiful, you ain't fit for doing nothing but to be a ornyment, like china jugs as nobody never uses for fear they'd break. An' after there come to Blaenafon that grand gentleman, his lordship Underwood, why, I told 'em in a minute as the Vicar hadn't got no more chance than I'd have if I was a young man as I used to be. No, I says at once, 'Miss Vaughan's going to be her ladyship Underwood.'"

Pugh looked into her face with a cunning smile, awaiting her approbation of his compliments. When she stared over the fields and said nothing, he thought it was her way of apeing her ladyship's airs already.

"An' you'll be a good lot too grand ever to come to poor Blaenafon any more, miss, then; but I daresay you'll have a wedding as we shall all remember you by till we come to the grave. I heard tell once of a man as got married out of England and there wasn't a man nor a woman sober that night. There was beer running like the river, and people walked

miles to get to that wedding, but 'twas a different matter when it come to walking back. I daresay though as the Vicar wouldn't let that happen in Blaenafon."

He looked down to the pony's hoofs. "I was saying since I see the smoke coming out o' the chimneys at Cae'rmynydd as most likely there'd be the two weddings at one time and perhaps the Bishop himself come to marry you both."

He stared in considerable amaze when Enid pulled up the pony's head with a jerk and started off at a sharp trot.

She felt that her face would tell her pitiful tale—tell the story of her defeat. The very people had it in their mouths that Henry loved Sarah Garland. She took no comfort to her pride that they arranged a much more splendid match for herself. Everything hurt her, even the least of happenings, revealing which way public fancy was running. It seemed to her as she hurried on that the whole parish was ringing with her story, and the talk of the match with Fenton Underwood was a pretty fiction made up to soothe her wounded *amour propre.*

The Cae'rmynydd chimneys smoked diligently through the week. Enid rode past every day and stared up at the trailing coils spreading on the murky air in gossamer film. Sarah was expected on the eleventh of December. It was a day of driving sleet, close horizons, and low-lying sky. The wind flapped as a loosened sail when the storms scudded by, speeding into the grey wall of distance, resounding as an echo.

John Bennington was expected on the eighteenth.

CHAPTER XXII.

SARAH drew a chair forward as Henry Ackworth entered the room; then turned and gave him her hand.

She sat down opposite to him, drawing her skirts back from the fire as she looked into the blaze. He gazed towards her. To him, coming out of the gloom of the past year's waiting, there was the strongest touch of unreality in thus sitting face to face with the flesh and blood vision of her. She was always less real, less actually of the world of others as she partook of that bright level of his imaginative ideals; as the hills and the wild tonic of their desolation had been to lesser emotions, so was she to the greatest. Ah!—that world of the ideal! He had lived in it from childhood; but now the smarts of another plane of being touched him shrewdly, rousing in him undreamt-of passions—and pains. Vaguely he conceived of a future many times removed from the fine air of idealism of his past days, a life that would mould bigger curves of character than the existence of the mountain parish priest had done; dimly he sensed the coming of more vital experience; he'd got to go down from the hill-tops to dwell among men who suffered and fought—and went under in

the fight. A wince of revulsion thrilled him. Would he also go under—if he lost, or—would it be if he won? There were moments when his past life smote him as cowardice, as a shirking of his just dues to the world that nourished him. Had he been paying the price of his manhood for an existence of sensuous delights?

After a while he asked, with tender raillery, "What have you to say to my year of obedience?"

She looked up, smiling timorously. "I knew its quality, or I couldn't have exacted it."

"But it was a revelation to myself. I had but little hope of success—at first."

"It was really self-discipline, on my part," she said. "I *had* to school myself—at your expense. But things have got to cut both ways."

"I'm the soul of selfishness," he replied. "It's joy to know it cuts both ways."

Then they smiled into each other's eyes, and after that she looked past him to the window and beyond to the dim grey distance, a weaving of mist and twilight, the night's dun hood drawing closer momently.

"Mr. Bennington comes on the eighteenth," she said at length.

He sighed. "Yes!—here?"

"My brother Jim brings him to Blaenafon, and they stay for Christmas." After a pause she asked, "You will see him?"

In spite of himself a wave of repulsion made him hesitate. "If—you wish it."

She thought a moment. "Will it not be best?"

"I have to admit to total darkness on the point."

Then she coloured a little. "I want him to see you."

"Will it do any good?" He spoke tentatively.

"I am thinking of the antagonism," she returned, "how it will stand between you——"

"Isn't that inevitable?"

"With one of you—yes. But which must it be?" She was asking a boon and he gazed away from her.

"You think it should not be myself?" he said, after a pause, turning his eyes towards her again.

But she only gave him a flitting glance and looked beyond him once more.

"You see, it will be just man meeting man," he said, leaning slightly towards her.

She said nothing.

"We shall stand on common ground."

"But not with a common endowment."

"Why not?"

She looked into his eyes, and he fancied he detected the liquid light of tears in hers. He drooped his head, staring at the floor, understanding.

"You think that he who suffers most should sacrifice most?" he said, after a pause. "*That* is what is inevitable—is it not?"

She got up suddenly and crossed the room to the window.

He sat, head bent, trying to grasp her attitude. It was so simple, so natural, to be a weakling, to cry out when one was denied delight. It ran into his mind that he had made of himself a spoilt child, and so found but poor equipment for the stern realities of existence. It seemed that he had to make an interchange of positions—himself he must thrust into the world's work, no longer idling in the pleasaunce of his petted idealism, while on the other hand the reality of passion that dominated his every

throb of life must be lifted to the plane of the ideal and become *reality* there. But this was only imagery of the brain; and heart throbs dominate the best laid arguments. He got up and went to her side.

She was staring over the dim landscape—a canvas of grey boulders, grazing sheep, white gable-ends, a solitary twisted tree, a more solitary figure driving cattle.

"It *can't* be that you will sacrifice yourself," he said, in quiet tones. Then felt the smart of his cowardice ere she could reply. The cunning of selfishness is past finding out. It was merely adroit to shelve responsibility from his own shoulders to hers.

She turned her head quickly. "Am I not helpless?" she said.

He gazed down, she upward to his face, he rebuked, but she not rebuking.

"Are you angry or shamed that I am such a frail vessel—not worthy to hold your love?" he returned.

She lowered her eyes, answering nothing, but said later, it seemed at random, out of a medley of thought, "If he needed me—if I were necessary to him——"

He interrupted with an impatient, revolted movement.

"I see it that way—sometimes," she concluded.

"You mean that he has a claim on you—the claim of humanity? But that cannot outweigh our love." He leaned towards her. "Dearest, it is but madness to argue. Love is right divine, and by that right we should act."

"Then what of the sanctity of a pledge?"

He stood upright and stared away to the boulder-

strewn slopes again and the grazing sheep. Evan Pugh's wife emerged out of the background of vaporous twilight, carrying a pail in one hand and a kettle in the other.

"Dearest," he said at length, "at this instant I despise myself, as you must also, but when I am parted from you again it will be the old self-pity, and —Dearest, it is knit into the very fibre of my being that we belong to each other. Ought you to give it into this man's hands to commit wrong? Do you not tempt him as it is not just to tempt another? Have you not responsibility there?"

After a moment she said, "That is it, I think. I *dare* not tamper with *his* responsibility—I have no right—he must be utterly free to act."

He was surprised when she turned to him holding out her hand.

"Good-bye—we mustn't talk any more. There is nothing more to be said."

"You dismiss me!" he said, smiling wanly.

She nodded, letting her hand rest in his.

Four days later the weather changed. It began in the afternoon when the smoke from Evan Pugh's basket chimney, which had trailed north-eastward for a week, gently hovered for an hour in whimsical uncertainty as to its direction, then finally trended in full slanting coils straight into the eye of the south.

"The wind, ma'am," said Pugh, touching his green hat brim with obsequiousness, "is changed itself this afternoon and gone up into the north. Most likely there'll be some frost come in the night. An' we're very glad to see you back again in Cae'rmynydd,

ma'am. That woman o' mine, she's that pleased to let you have the milk again, she'd let you have it for nothing if she wasn't so thankful of a little money, poor thing." He glanced down at the gate. He had brought an afternoon offering of a small jug of cream for tea and three brown eggs. "It seem a good bit ago since you went away, ma'am, and they was saying as you'd gone round the world, an' I says to 'em, 'That's a big journey for a lady wi' never a man to look after her.' But you didn't come by no harm, ma'am."

"No."

"They tell the children in the school as the world's same shape as a orange, and when people go round it there's times when they're standing straight on the other side from us, but I don't see how it come about if folks don't stand on their heads. Did you go in them parts, ma'am?"

"No—not so far."

"Oh, indeed. I got a ole geography book in the house with a lot o' names of places in it—there's Jerusalem where Jesus Christ lived, an' Rome where the Pope is——"

"Yes—I've been in Rome."

"Have you, ma'am, an' see the Pope?"

"Yes, I've seen the Pope."

"Well, now, ma'am, if the Methodies round about here was to know that you'd never be safe from 'em. They got a awful way against people as they think knows about the Pope and them sort o' religions with adultery, and holy water, and priests with no wives, all mixed up together; not as I'd care for a religion myself where you was expected to confess whatever you may have been doin'—good or bad.

There's things as a man had best keep to himself, for there's nobody can live without a bit o' sin now an' then."

Sarah had met him at the door. She was ready dressed for a walk, and when Eliza brought back the jug he ambled a little behind her as she made her way to the road.

"An' we're all expecting a lot o' things to happen, ma'am, now you've come back. There's his lordship Underwood coming to marry Miss Vaughan, they do say, an' mos' likely the Vicar himself to be married the same time—we're all going to wish you 'good luck,' ma'am, an' a boy to begin with, as we say in the country here."

Sarah turned up the road and met the sting of the north wind. She had forgotten Pugh ere she had gone twenty yards. There were two whole days and three nights to be endured before Bennington arrived. She made childish calculations as to the length of these coming hours up to the moment when she would see him. She was avoiding all meetings with Henry Ackworth since their last talk—it was better so, but this did not mean that she was not tortured for the sight of him. A year's severance from all touch with him had worked more havoc than she guessed with that inner sanity that was so necessary to outer serenity.

She knew she had arranged everything in the way that would hurt most both herself and Henry; but the touch of strenuousness in her nature had made it seem necessary so to act—that Bennington might meet Henry Ackworth, and weigh his rival, that Ackworth himself should see her dilemma in its reality, that all three should stand on common ground

for the few days in which the drama must be played out.

When she had been walking half an hour she saw a solitary figure on horseback, on a far link of the mountain road, and guessed it was Enid Mary. Her thoughts ran quickly to the tragedy of the girl's passion. If only she would marry Fenton Underwood! Fifteen minutes later they met and Enid checked the pony and smiled wanly.

"You're a long way from home," she said, "and it will soon be dark. I was just thinking of telling the pony to hurry on a bit."

"Yes, I'm turning back now," said Sarah.

She and the pony moved side by side for a short distance.

"Did you know Sir Fenton Underwood was coming for Christmas?" asked Enid.

"No."

"I didn't, until to-day. It seems Henry has written and asked him and he has promised to come. Did you know he had again asked me to marry him?"

"I hope you will accept him the third time," said Sarah, in even tones.

"*Why* do you say that?" demanded Enid, white-hot with subtle anger instantly.

Sarah glanced up to her. "Don't be cross!" she said. "I should indeed like to see you happy."

"But you wouldn't step out of my path that I might be so," returned the girl in the same quick irritable way.

Sarah took the pony's bridle and checked the animal's progress and stood, looking up to her. "Enid, believe me when I tell you I shall not stand

in your path in the way you mean. Fate has decided otherwise, I assure you."

She did not remove her gaze when she ceased, but bent her eyes appealingly upon the girl.

"Are you so *sure* of that?" demanded Enid.

"I am very sure."

There was an instant's silence, then Enid burst out, "But if *I* cannot believe it—what is that to me? You are pleased to think you are going to be a martyr, but you won't find it so easy as you think——"

"I'm not expecting anything to be easy."

Enid laughed, suddenly, harshly. "I suppose you want to tell me how hard your lot is. Pooh! The man you love, loves you—what else matters?"

Sarah stared away to the far hills just touched with the first delicate film of coming night. After all, here was truth from an unexpected quarter, and a truth too, that, much as she had tried to impress it upon Henry, she sorely needed teaching herself. What else mattered? It brought all her sympathy to the fore for the poor sore-hearted girl beside her.

"Enid," she said, "can you believe that I am sorry to the bottom of my heart for you, that I would do anything I could to give you happiness?"

A queer light came into Enid's eyes; she glanced away a moment before she said, bending towards Sarah, "Then, if Mr. Bennington agrees to give you up, and you are free to marry Henry, promise me that you will never marry him. Don't tell me over again that there is no possibility of that happening, but just take your chance and give me that promise."

Sarah's hands slipped to her side, her muff dangling from one. Enid watched her keenly, an unpleasant half smile on her lips. During the last week, since

Sarah Garland had returned to Blaenafon, all the old hatreds had sprung from hiding once more, the touch of gentleness that had seemed a gloss over her lesser nature during recent months was lost again in the tormenting humours that had full dominion over her.

"Well," she said at length, "I suppose I need not wait any longer for what I shall not get."

Sarah lifted her eyes. It was something of a triumph to the girl in the saddle to be thus witness of a struggle in one so outwardly strong as Sarah. For several moments she tried to enjoy her position. Then she broke out, "I *knew* you would not give it me for all your talk—and you'd be a fool if you did." Then with a little ironical touch, "'Each for himself,' as Evan Pugh says," and snatched at the rein so that the pony darted forward with curvettings of alarm ere he swung into a sharp trot.

CHAPTER XXIII.

So the eighteenth of December arrived, and the sun swept first beams over a world mail-clad in silvery white. The rime crystals lay close as threaded beads on every spike of vegetation, sheathing grass blades and frail twigs, embroidering boughs and trunks on their northward sides with filigree of dainty imagery. In every cranny and crevice were quaint conceits wrought by the ice fairies; the grey-green fields were damasked tablecloths over which the sheep wandered disconsolate, or huddled themselves in groups, on the leeside of the fencing walls; stretches of bog, the surface diversified with bristling rushes, were as samplers—the pale ground stitched over with grotesque shapes in purple, rose, and gold, the sunlight washing colour into every stem.

It was a slow-moving day to Sarah. The travellers could not arrive until late afternoon. She helped Eliza with some of the cookery, and then, at intervals, stood at the landing window gazing to the link of road where the vehicle must first come into sight. She had a queer disinclination towards going out of doors, lovely as the day was, calling her open-air spirit in a hundred subtle ways.

Night, running fast on the heel of sun setting, was

casting its first pale film over the hills, and lamps were lighted below stairs, when Sarah, at the landing window again, caught the sound of far rumbling wheels through the stillness of the frosty air. She stood until a black body hove in sight and crawled onward. Then she descended, threw a cloak about her shoulders and placed herself in the open doorway.

There was the stopping of a vehicle below on the road, the sound of voices; then someone climbed the steps towards the house and a figure came towards her hastily.

"Sally."

"Jim."

He pressed her hand, kissed her, set down the bag he carried and returned to assist with the rest of the luggage. Then a taller figure than Jim's approached, an arm was slipped easily about her, a kiss was on her forehead, and a voice said, "My dear, dear girl."

She felt giddy and confused after that, and went indoors quickly and told Eliza they had come, and were the fires all right upstairs? The girl who helped Eliza was sent up to attend to them again.

Mr. Bennington came in at length with an easy air. It was strange to Sarah to look at him in the lamplight, to note the samenesses and differences—the slight tendency to full habit of body disappeared, and a touch of gauntness in the face; the big insouciance, the commanding presence the same as ever, the atmosphere that must either revolt or subdue. In summing up she thought the differences were slight compared with the unimpaired samenesses. He might have been away a month, at most, and now returned to her with travel news to tell. In spite of her esti-

mate of him, she was amazed at his attitude. When he came downstairs she was alone, standing in front of the fire, her hands lightly clasped before her. He went to her side.

"Now, the first question of all, please," he began, "Why, *why* have you sought the last crevice among these desolate hills to hide yourself in?"

She lifted her head, then her hands, and rearranged some scarlet hips and bits of bronze bracken in a little vase on the mantelshelf.

"I like the place," she said, in the manner of a tentative beginning.

"How did you find it?"

"Through an advertisement in a paper of the district that I came across by accident."

"And you deserted Brux House?"

"For the time being."

"But what's the idea?—I can't make it out."

She moved away, carrying the little vase of hips and bracken to a small table. It was but a few feet of space that was between them, but as she turned again it seemed the placing of a barrier.

"I won't try to explain now," she said, and in his glance she detected his first inkling of the barrier.

He stared into the fire a moment.

"Do you mean that for a challenge?" he asked, when he looked up again.

"No, but if you take it so——"

"Certainly I won't! My dear Sarah, you can't imagine I'm in fighting trim after what I've gone through—Good God—no!" He walked away from her, then returned. "We'll talk things out—later, shall we?" he said, coaxingly. "I'm all done up—as you may imagine." He sighed. "And don't you

think it would have lightened the horrors of existence for me if there had been just one letter from you to cheer me?"

She looked up to his face.

"I can't explain that, either—not simply, and we have no time before dinner for more."

"Wasn't it hard?" he said in a persisting way, as if the point were too sore to be set aside.

"That would rest on point of view. I did not feel hard, only—neutral."

He waited a moment, wrinkling his forehead. "You see, I've got to explain things to you—you're all in the dark, of course. You've really had no more to go on than the general public, and God knows they were misled pretty disastrously—for me. You naturally thought things were black against me."

"On the contrary, I had no feeling whatever in the matter. I can't say that it ever occurred to me to consider even what I was told—it couldn't affect me at all. The only thing was—the relation between us."

"Ah!" He brightened. "You dwelt on that—so like a good woman. And the scandals about me did me no harm in your eyes."

"None, because I knew so little of them. I did not read the papers."

"What an incurious woman." He surveyed her with puzzled reflectiveness. "How did you live—outside it all?"

"That was very simple. I *was* outside it all."

"Extraordinary aloofness—wasn't it?"

"I cannot judge."

He came closer and took her hand, and although she made no dissentient sign she drew it away almost immediately.

"Sarah, my dear girl, you're not going to get on a very high horse, after all, are you? Don't for pity's sake—I can't stand much—I'm simply shattered."

There was sudden peevish petulance in his manner, and she was a little surprised at the signs of weary misery settling upon his face.

"Can you imagine what it was to me?" he went on, gently, insistingly, "what it was for a man like me——"

"I seem a little cold there, I admit," she answered, in a quaintly formal way.

"And you did not think of my sufferings?"

"Perhaps I am hard," she said. "I did not wish to be." She sighed and moved from him. "But I have a lot to tell you, to put before you—that may explain things, in some degree, but it must be later —to morrow, perhaps." She was walking across the room. "If you'll excuse me, I'll go now and put on my frock for dinner. I hear Jim coming."

With an eye to his sister's convenience Jim disappeared the next morning directly after breakfast. Sarah came back from confabulation with Eliza upon the day's arrangements, to find Bennington staring through the window.

"You've got a view," he said, turning to her, "but, Heavens, what a desolation! And why on earth you should come to such a place to spend Christmas in is beyond imagining. Brux House would be more to my taste."

"Shall we sit down and I will explain all that," she answered.

"It strikes one as the trick of a faddist," he said,

as he seated himself, "as if it were an experiment in human endurance."

She looked very directly at him. "I came here," she replied, "rather in the spirit of an experiment, but I sha'n't be able to make clear to you all the workings of mind that brought me to the feeling of wanting to hide. You know I went about for a year with Cousin Anne and her father, then came her wedding, and I was thrown upon my own resources. And I didn't want to live in Brux House again—yet. I had the feeling that I had first to work through a sort of interim, I came here just to be clear of everybody —I hardly expect to make it quite plain to you. At any rate, I got to know some people here—the Vicar, his aunt, and his cousin." Involuntarily she paused, still looking at him. "We were just acquaintances in the ordinary way for a number of months. I set about learning the language, and we fished and rode together—Miss Vaughan and I—Mr. Ackworth, too, at times. I came here on the edge of May of last year, but it was not until September that we found out what had happened—between Mr. Ackworth and myself——"

She felt a little sick, and oh, so tremulous and afraid. It was tearing open one's breast to show one's heart. She felt the swift chill of pallor on her face.

"You mean," he said, rather dryly, "that this Vicar has fallen in love with you."

"I mean," she went on with infinite effort, "that it was mutual." Then stood up, steadying herself with a hand on the mantelpiece.

The silence seemed long. She gazed over his bowed head to the silver-mailed landscape, until a

movement on his part brought her eyes down to meet his. She didn't grasp the force of his expression until he spoke.

"Of course, it's very honest on your part to tell me."

She was in amaze for a moment, and said, childishly precise, "There was no other course open to me."

He made a gesture, half of amusement, half contempt. "Oh well, nine women out of ten would have concealed it, nevertheless—you're the tenth, it seems."

The contempt roused her. "You are labouring under some mistaken view, it would be impossible to conceal the situation."

"Why, dear me, no—it's quite simple. Hold your tongue—that's all."

"I repeat," she said, more vigorously, "that it is impossible to keep silence." But the first glimpse of the attitude he was assuming dawned upon her. "We had better speak plainly and not bandy words uselessly. Let me put the case: I am pledged to marry you; I gave my word to you at a time of great inexperience. Later it has come to my knowledge that I do not bear you an affection that can sanctify marriage——"

"Don't worry. I am content," he interposed.

"But there are two to a bargain——" He looked up quickly, scarce hiding anxiety. "It is not just either to you or myself to hold to our former position. I do not love you——"

"Ah, but you must let me have my say there," he cried. "It is true there must be two to make or *unmake* a bargain. What of my feelings for you?"

Her glance was as the stroke of a creature at bay, splendid, but ineffective, though the assailant winced

under it. He regained composure almost instantly and stood up, facing her, thrusting his hands into his pockets, assuming a negligent attitude with shoulder against the mantelshelf.

"I see your position," he said, with startling coolness. "It *is* awkward; you're between two stools —me and this other fellow—and you don't quite see how to act without one having to go to the wall." In the silence while he waited for her to speak, he noted the proud air that was growing upon her momently. It warned him to extreme wariness.

"You see," he continued, "possession's nine points of the law, so really the other fellow isn't in it, because I am in possession of your pledged word—am I not?"

She resented the artifice to draw the admission from her in so many words.

"What is just and what judicial are frequently at variance, I believe," she said.

"Then we'll leave that part of the question, essential as it is to the main issue. I am presupposing from your attitude that had you been free you would have accepted this mountain Vicar—it's a little hard on my vanity, you'll admit, but let that pass; it comes simply to a tug of war between me and the unknown Vicar."

"There will be nothing of the kind, of course. I put the facts before you, and look to you to act as becomes an honourable man."

"Tut, tut, my dear Sarah, don't throw big words about—though one takes them from a woman, of course." He rather wondered at her seeming height as she gazed steadily at him. "This is really all very surprising—and unnecessary; and it was a great

mistake for you to come to such a place as this—I'm sure I should never have agreed if I'd been consulted. Why didn't Jim interfere? A thousand pities we were not married before—— Well, am I to meet this redoubtable Vicar who has done me such ill-service?"

"Certainly."

"Oh, very glad to make his acquaintance. Now I see your plan of bringing me to this lost corner of the world, rather clever of you, my dear Sarah—by Jingo, yes; both parties to meet on a sort of neutral ground—quite an arena for me and the Vicar to tilt at each other in, and find out who's best man Ha, ha, ha! Well, shall we let the subject alone for the present, and will you not take me a walk in these wilds?"

"Have you any letters to attend to? The post goes at noon."

He shrugged his shoulders, his face hardened. "No, my correspondence is likely to leave me particularly free, for the present." He put his hand upon her arm. "Has it never occurred to you that I am a drowning man and you are my straw? The world has turned its back on me, my dear. My noble brother and his wife have cut me; my friends will take their cue from that. You see, when they took me to Parkhurst they might as well have hanged me outright for what use life will be to me—apart from you. Do you see what you mean to me—don't you recognise you are my all! I am a dead man to all intent and purpose to the circle I have always lived in—and what other is there for me, what foothold have I in life—save through you? You and you alone can rehabilitate me in the eyes of the world,

you only can reinstate me in the place that I forfeited (according to popular opinion) by wearing the broad arrow through a nominal period of five years."

He spoke more hurriedly as he went on, and more urgently. She stood very still, enduring his nearness, his touch upon her arm, with a quiet air of aloofness. She was a little surprised at the sternness of her mood, his appeal did not move her, and it was not in her nature to be harsh, to hold back sympathy. She drew a long breath at last, and took a step forward. None knows the heat and stress of battle until the fight has begun. She was trying to look the future in the face and not flinch, but it was a dead wall that shut her in, closed about her at this very moment —the future was now, multiplied a hundred thousand times, a ceaseless repetition of these moments. She said dully, "Let us go out, then."

He sighed and leaned towards her again. "You do see it, dear, don't you?"

She put her hand to her head. "I see what you mean, of course."

"Then don't let us say another word on the subject. Think, I am but just come from—what?—hell itself could not be more terrible to me, with just one little star of hope in my sky—you, dear. You won't blot it out—that star."

She put her hands behind her, stiffening her whole figure as her mood grew steadier, saner. "Are you not narrowing the whole situation to a very small circle—yourself, judging everything as it applies to you personally? Big things can't be so circumscribed, there's no room for right action."

But even as she spoke the futility of the words struck her chill. Had she not known it all along—

this selfish attitude, as the only one John Bennington would assume?

"I suppose," he said, trying hard to find an easy phrase to take the brunt of the ugliness of his doggedness, "that we all see with our own eyes, don't you know, and perhaps it is a bit one-sided—the view we get. Can't we generally retort on equal terms, too?"

"Generally." She met his smile.

"Things *are* one-sided, in this world," he went on, touched with more assurance of his footing, "and I'm free to admit *my* position—it's simply abject. I have nothing—neither a habitation nor a name; I am looking to you for everything. Can you imagine a fellow-mortal in worse case than I am in?"

She thought she couldn't; but again it was one-sided and *his* meaning was not hers.

He thrust his hands into his pockets again, letting his head sink forward.

"It was like a distant lamp in utter darkness," he said, speaking slowly, "the thought of you. I should have gone mad without it, and I am not using a figure of speech to heighten the effect. Good God! None but the unhappy wretches who have gone through it can know what it means—*no* imagination could suffice." He shuddered.

She was looking at him, realising for the first time what he meant, and also catching a glimpse of what his imprisonment had really signified to him. She was thinking, too, that love would have given her intuition, that her dullness, besides seeming cruel, was ominous, foretelling a future when it would be possible for her to harden a shell about herself, shutting out all human sympathy. Then she shuddered.

"There are men who smash the poor bits of things

they have in their cells," he continued; "they are punished for it, necessarily so, but there were times when nerve tension verged so near mania that all I could do scarce prevented my doing so myself. It eats into your very soul, gnaw, gnaw, the awful sense of being cut off from your kind and branded; and to a man of my standing the branding is the worst to endure—it is all nightmare—a private hell into which each is severally thrust in deference to a most fastidious public conscience."

He was looking on the floor. She was still regarding him attentively. She was thinking that punishment had hardened him in that supreme selfishness which marks a man's face as with a stigma, that little as he had cared for his fellow man by natural birthright of sympathy, he would henceforth care less. It was as if he had been thrust back and ever back to that one point—the centre and pivot of being, which, with the gloss of all outer things rent away, was so poor a tenement.

His voice went on with a murmurous continuity. "And it was always that one thought of you that saved me in the end; at the very verge of a mad outburst it slipped into my mind that after all there *was* a future for me, that the present horror had a limit in time, at least, and then there would be Brux House and its mistress to console me. If even a doubt of it had entered my brain, I should have gone mad for a certainty."

How coldly critical it was possible to be. She said, "Of course you are trying to put a responsibility upon my shoulders that in justice you cannot foist upon anyone. While I am not impervious to your need for sympathy, I yet see that only yourself can

reinstate yourself—in the good opinion of others—*and* yourself."

"But I must have means—a ladder to climb by; none can make headway alone!" he cried with the quick aptitude of the self-centred.

"That attitude too often treads others down, I fear," she replied.

"I don't think *anyone*, much less my incapable self, could ever tread *you* down, Sarah. You're too coldly impassive, too aloof from others, too securely wrapped up in a superiority that is most becoming as an aid to your personal distinction, but, forgive me, rather cold-blooded to the man who fell among thieves—there's too much passing by on the other side."

"And you want twopence, and to be carried to the inn," she retorted, smiling.

He looked up gladly to greet her smile. "I want *you*, Sarah, my dear."

"Always supposing I represent the twopence and access to the inn?"

He laughed with quick gaiety. "Of course, you wouldn't *really* leave a fellow on the roadside, would you?"

She was amazed at the wild dominance of a wild despair. She looked to the floor, then to his face. "Yes, I would leave him gladly—if he would be left."

"Ah, but those last words belie you, my dear girl—you see, you *couldn't*, because naturally he would never sanction your going on without him. Let us admit at once that the sick and wounded are always hide-bound in their selfishness. And they are forgiven—on account of their pains."

She weighed a thought a moment to give it balance. "And Charity has *no* rights."

"None. How otherwise would the halt, and the blind, and the maimed get any of the good things of the world? They *have* to depend on the others, and the others are so superior—they give in."

She smiled away to the gleaming hill-horizon, where the morning sunlight and the white vapours distilled from the frost crystals had woven a gossamer garment of turquoise tints. Every hollow in the landscape was tented with the same dainty webbing, and the moorland glowed in a radiance of clearest light. With an aching, yet also numbing sense of loss, desolation, she looked on this beauty as something that would at least be left to her—out of the wreckage.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HENRY ACKWORTH entered the room with the feeling that his sight was blurred. A tall man rose from a cosy chair beside the fire, and Sarah introduced "Mr. Bennington" to "Mr. Ackworth." The stranger greeted the newcomer with polished ease. Ackworth sat down with the sense of being worsted in some unexplained encounter. Jim Garland had gone roaming again; he felt his present anomalous position acutely.

"Wintry weather," observed Bennington, taking the lead easily.

"Yes—rather bleak to-day."

"A rather remarkable spot for human habitation, in any case, about here, isn't it?"

"To a stranger, no doubt, it appears so."

"How do you manage to exist?"

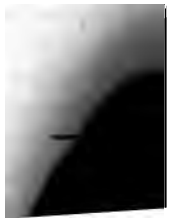
Ackworth smiled. "It's not *quite* so impossible as it appears at first sight."

"I suppose not, or there'd be an exodus forthwith of the whole population. Not, however, that I've yet discovered where the inhabitants have stowed themselves."

"Oh, you see the houses here and there."

"Each in its own isolation."

... are so superior—the
She smiled away to the
... the morning sunlight a
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landscape was tented with the
and the moorland glowed in
light. With an aching, yet al
loss, desolation, she looked on
thing that would at least be le
wreckage.



"Yes—there are not two side by side in the whole parish."

"Extraordinary place to live in—or rather to vegetate in—*life* cannot move in such desolation."

"We make very comfortable shift, I assure you. And in the summer it is exceedingly beautiful."

"Probably. But I should want to winter in more genial quarters. Is there anything in the shape of sport to be had?"

"Yes—wild fowl, you know. If you cared to join us, my friend Sir Fenton Underwood and myself will be spending a day on the bogs next week."

"Thanks, very much. Do you have much luck?"

"Well, to be frank—not a great deal. A few wild ducks, generally."

"How's the fishing—any salmon?"

"Only when the river's in spate—the people go out at night with torches to spear them."

"H'm! Nobody objects?"

Henry answered, "No, we are all landed gentry in our own right, you know, and we're neighbourly."

Bennington cast quietly critical glances upon Ackworth as they talked. "Do the people farm on these bare hillsides?"

"Yes—in a poor, rough way, of course."

"You don't grow wheat, for instance."

"No—not just here. Oats and barley, but not a great deal of that, only enough for their own use."

"Then they make their money out of stock?"

"Yes—there are several large horse fairs in the district every year, and some very good animals change hands."

"Ah, there's a stiff-built little pony that's native here, I remember."

"Yes, on the higher mountains there—the Berwyns, where the desolation is pretty complete, they feed in herds—tough little fellows with long manes, and tails touching the ground."

"Ah—I've only seen them trimmed up."

The talk ran smoothly from one topic to another. Bennington's sang-froid was perfect. Sarah kept almost complete silence. Once she glanced at Ackworth, but he was not looking her way at the moment. Half-an-hour passed. Both men seemed anxious to keep the talk going. Sarah fancied she detected a touch of strenuousness in Henry's manner, the least sign of suppressed excitement. On the other hand, Bennington preserved the unmoved bearing of the man of the world whom nothing disturbs; yet his criticism was unceasing; he eyed the other with discreetly veiled interest.

Eliza created a diversion by bringing in the tea, and then Jim strolled in, and five minutes later Mrs. Vaughan and Enid arrived.

Enid was visibly excited. She fixed her attention upon the stranger instantly. In a short time she seemed fascinated by him; she watched every gesture, listened for each word. *Would* he carry off Sarah Garland? Now the actual moment of denouement was at hand, she could not quell the one wild passionate hope. At least let Henry be free—if he would not marry herself, then let him marry no one. Bennington's big coolness of manner raised her spirits; she thought he was self-confident, the sort of man to scorn the idea of another ousting him from any place where he had foothold.

On the contrary, Mrs. Vaughan was repelled by the latest arrival; it was easy to detect her feeling in her

attitude of aloofness, and a frank disinclination to talk to him. She confined her attention to Jim Garland, but while they chatted pleasantly together she had an ear for the surrounding conversation, and caught a phrase here and there that gave her the gist of it. The men had got into an argument upon a point in current politics, and Henry had grown interested, and his gift of polished speech was rather telling against the other's blunt sallies. The contrast between them was striking; they seemed picked types of opposing strengths, and the outcome of every battle between them would be decided by the subtlety of reserves—in victor or vanquished? It was impossible for the outsider to judge without the bias of his own inclination. Enid's hopes lifted themselves momently; and Jim Garland, too, was conscious of an upraising of his spirits, but of course his point of view was not Enid's.

Under his easy well-bred air Bennington veiled a truculence of bearing that assumed a brutal phase in contrast to the other's nervous restraint. It would depend so entirely upon the *quality* of the dispute as to whose powers would conquer and worst the other. As the talk between them grew a little heated silence fell on the others, and a certain sort of waiting air pervaded them, as if indeed this were a preliminary testing of weapons, and the present winning or losing an inkling of the ending of greater matters to come.

Bennington ended the discussion abruptly when Henry brought forward a new point with which to clinch his argument.

"Ah, you are better informed than I am—naturally," and he turned away with a slightly injured air.

Everybody was uncomfortable for the moment, the tone, gesture, attitude, bespoke a splendour of cowardice—the pose of mind compatible with an abject sense of injury, and the claiming of sympathetic indulgence, never the modest shame of dignity outraged, or of the moral sense smarting.

Enid went to bed almost happy that night. She thought Henry hadn't a chance against the returned Bennington; she sensed rather than divined the colossal powers of such a man—that his weapons, while being of infinitely inferior quality and temper to Henry's, would win him his desires by sheer weight of wielding. She was sure Henry could not stand against the newcomer's determination to hold Sarah to her word, for that he *did* so hold her, she had no doubt, both from his own manner, and from Sarah's scarcely perceptible droop towards sombreness.

Fenton Underwood arrived next day. Enid's thoughts had been so engrossed in the tense phases of her present life that she had scarce remembered his pose of a few weeks earlier, but when he appeared in precisely the same humour, with exactly the same pleasant stand-off agreeableness, she recalled it suddenly—and unpleasantly. With illogical whimsicalness, she was a little disappointed that he did not come in lover's humour, but behaved, indeed, as if he had quite given up the idea of acting in that rôle. She noted that he was undisguisedly anxious to meet Mr. Bennington, and she felt that to be another oblique slight towards herself. Clearly he was desirous of making a calculation as to Henry's chances; it would be in the nature of a retort upon Sir Fenton if Sarah married Bennington after all his hopes to the contrary.

* * * * *

The ponies' shoes had been spiked with steel, and so the nimble little animals trotted with perfect safety over the frozen roads. Enid was in her brightest mood; but she found it impossible to gauge Sarah's humour; she was tortured with an aching curiosity to find out if she were despondent or buoyant in spirits. On her part Sarah noted the girl's excess of vivacity, the quick, questioning flashings of her fine eyes, the delicate rose flush on her ivory cheeks; and with a touch of that very English aloofness that often has root in what might, perhaps, be called unresponsiveness, she felt peculiarly incapable of even sympathising with such unnecessary fervour, such display of an extreme of temperament. She could recall the opposite pole of Enid's range of emotions, and to her saner nature the poles seemed too far apart.

In the early morning when the shooters had set forth the hoar-frost was thick as a fall of snow, and even now, towards noon, as the girls rode briskly over the hard roads, under lee of walls and banks, in sheltered ditches, and over the whole expanse of bare moorland the silver rime lay untouched by the wandering broken beams of a pale wintry sun.

Dark objects stood out against this chaste background with sharp definition, and while they were yet a long way off they could distinguish various black dots on the white surface, the smaller dots being the dogs, the larger the men.

"There they are!" cried Enid excitedly. "Come along," and started off at a canter, to find, however, that Sarah was keeping her normal pace. The report of a gun rang sharply across the quiet spaces of air.

"There! Who was that?" she exclaimed, when

Sarah had come alongside once more. "*Was* it Fenton Underwood, I wonder? He rather fancies himself a crack shot, I believe—usual masculine conceit! What can Mr. Bennington do?"

"I really don't know."

Enid's scrutiny was rude in its penetrative ardour.

"I daresay he's used to very different shooting from this?"

"Yes, no doubt."

"His brother, I suppose, has a big estate?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever visited there?"

"Not in the present owner's time."

"Oh, when Mr. Bennington's father was alive?"

"Yes."

"What a pity Mr. Bennington is not the eldest son."

Sarah laughed. The inconsequent childishness of Enid on some occasions was a permanent cause of wonder to her.

Another report rang out suddenly, and they caught sight of the dispersing puff of smoke.

"Now, who *was* that? Do let's hurry a bit and see what they're getting," and Enid again set off at a canter.

Sarah followed at a quiet amble.

The great stretch of bog was set in an amphitheatre of hills, whose bleached sides gleamed with their pallor under the touch of wandering sunlight, in contrast to the rich dark glowing of the marshy bottom, gashed in all directions, the black oozy water lying stagnant, glassy, in the old cuttings.

The nearest sportsman came towards Enid and passed her. As he drew nearer to her companion it

proved to be Henry Ackworth. Before he reached her Sarah noted the tense expression of his countenance. Without quite knowing why, she halted; and he came close and put his hand on the peak of the saddle. It seemed a gesture claiming her. She met his glance mutely, and saw the light in his eyes come and go. She spoke nervously in a moment, vaguely alarmed by his looks.

"Don't hope—put hope away."

"I cannot!" he cried, on a sudden, sharp note. "He will yield—he *must* yield!"

She stared away. "He will not. From his point of view, he cannot. I represent his worldly position, his bread even. It is not in his nature, after all, to rise to self-sacrifice of that order. His friends have cast him off—he is dependent upon me for everything."

He gazed abroad to the white-mailed hills, scarred with scrub that stood out darkly as clefts might do, to the naked stretch of landscape with the stained rushes upstanding in soft suffusion of purples, pinks, crimson, and chastened golds, to the far horizon that was the Berwyns' rim, the outposts of wild miles of desolate hilltops, where only the hardiest sheep and ponies can battle with the winter rigours. A heat grew in his brain, and stories ran in his mind of the old time when life in these solitudes was harsher and wilder even than now, when men claimed their brides by force—— It became swiftly real to him. The blood of a hundred of his forefathers, filtered and refined in his mother's veins, now ran riotously in his.

"Dearest, let us go. This is but a drama of torture. We belong to each other—no right can outright love's right."

She leaned slightly towards him. "You make it so hard, so bitterly hard," she pleaded.

"Nay!" he cried, buoyant. "It is but escaping wrong; no man has any claim upon you against your will."

"He claims the fulfilling of my bond."

"Dearest, it was broken long ago—our love broke it—there is no bond."

"Then what is a bond?"

"That sort of bond can only be sanctified by love."

She shook her head, sighing.

"It cannot exist without sanctification," he cried. "It is but gossamer."

"And yet a sword cannot sever it." She looked into his face.

"The sword of right can," he returned quickly. "Right is might, you know."

"That cuts both ways. John Bennington believes he has right on his side. He has—his sort of right."

He smiled into her eyes, his own radiant with the magic of imagination's urging. He was wrapped in glamour that made him handsome as a prince of old-time tale, and her heart sank with a little fear—fear that he would overcome.

"We are not children," he said.

"No, that is it—one cannot shirk responsibility—a woman may not play jilt even to a bad man."

"What need to call yourself an ugly name?" he asked, but brightly.

"Wouldn't an ugly deed demand it?"

"We wrong no one!"

"Save ourselves."

"Let us leave that bone of contention to pick at our leisure, dearest, and then I shall be able to defy

you to find a shred of fact upon it." He laughed as if all were accomplished in accordance with his heart's desire.

Her heart sank yet again. It was as if this vital mood in him robbed her of force to supply itself, his magnetism sapped her will-power, or rather her motive-power of rebelling against his will.

She saw the others coming their way, Bennington beside Enid's pony, talking with her gaily, Underwood a pace behind, unloading his gun. She sat still and mute as they wound along the rough track towards them. Henry watched her face.

"Is your pony reluctant to come farther, Sarah?" said Bennington when within earshot.

She smiled. "How do you do, Sir Fenton?"

Henry turned and faced them and listened while they chatted.



CHAPTER XXV.

DUSK set in early, and after a day of fairly successful shooting the sportsmen made ready for returning homeward. Henry said he had a call to pay in the neighbourhood if the others could find their way home alone. He was a trifle surprised when Bennington said, "Should you mind if I accompanied you?—if Sir Fenton and Jim will excuse my desertion."

So Underwood and Jim Garland struck the nearest route to the rough high road, and went on their way. They were very silent. Henry's mood of the day had not escaped Underwood. He had studied Bennington, too. And he was utterly in the dark as to what the outcome of this *impasse* would be. Seeing the two men together had both widened and narrowed his conception of the plane of conflict—it was wider inasmuch as the newcomer was a man to be reckoned with, he saw that instantly, and it was shut within a less area from the fact that Henry's mood had shelved, now it had come to the sticking place, to that of "the simple barbarian," as his friend put it. It went without saying that Bennington's attitude was barbarian likewise—but with a difference. His aims were varied, and might or might not include

the one phase which was Henry's sole foothold—the love of Sarah Garland.

For the hundredth time Underwood tried to thresh out the basic meaning of this "emotion called love." He had already hit on the fact that it was wide as the world and contained as many phases of itself; it seemed to him that with some men one phase filled life to overflowing, while others indeed boxed the whole compass of love. He placed himself in the former category, Henry in the latter. And so it was that while the man of simpler range was steadfast and unalterable on his one pivot of bliss, the other passed from one level to another, and his actions of any moment were tinctured if not entirely guided by the prevailing mood. It would be thus with Henry when it came, as it must do, to a meeting between him and Bennington for deciding the future of both.

Underwood had not missed observing Sarah as she sat her pony awaiting their approach earlier in the day, nor Henry's air of happy abstraction. Possibly Bennington had been equally sure-sighted, and had taken opportunity by the forelock. As the pale dusk settled more closely upon the landscape, and a little eerie wind ran over the slopes with plaintive tunefulness, and footsteps resounded with metallic insistence on the lone and silent road, Sir Fenton was wondering with many misgivings which of Henry's moods was really his master mood—the one that under stress must of its own innate power dominate all others and lead to—victory or defeat? And which would be victory and which defeat? In his heart he quite believed that Henry *had* the power within him to wrest Sarah Garland to himself by that royal road of dominance which the greatest

possess, but *was* that Henry's strongest possession? What of that measure of the Celt, wild hill Celt, the source and nourisher of his "simple barbarian" pose? All his fears for his friend ran to that point. In his travelling days Sir Fenton had heard of a certain famous eastern scheme of athletics by which the weaker physically, possessing the needful knowledge, easily overcomes the stronger *without* the knowledge. He thought Henry would find a grasp of moral jujit-su useful in his encounter with Bennington.

Henry and his companion turned northward and wound their way along a path threading the bog as a seam; it was merely a depression of the vegetation caused by the passage of feet, but there was not enough traffic to wear the tough fibres away. They passed in single file, Henry in front, calling out warnings when there were well-heads to leap across or patches of actual swamp, verdant with the green of the water mosses, in strong contrast to the sombre shades of colouring round about. A mile of this travelling brought them at length to a rough gully, a sunken boulder-strewn track that was little better than a water-course; Bennington's unfamiliar feet stumbled at every step. Blundering along they came to a tiny plateau of ground on which stood a solitary cottage. Henry asked Bennington if he would enter with him, but the latter replied that he would rather wait outside.

The night was setting in keen and frosty. In the west were lingering touches of sunset, veiled with finest steel-grey vapours, the translucent green of the sky barred with dusky horizontal bars. Bennington stared idly at the panorama; a faint pearl line

under the vapours was the sea. The wind ran down the gully in icy draughts, and made him shiver; there were phrases of music in it as it swept over the hill-tops above his head, pretty cadences as it slipped from on high to the plain on which the gully debouched. Save for the wind it was intensely silent —no calling of birds or of cattle or of human voices. A star leapt to view, a point of light, quivering as if it were an arrow-tip arrested in full flight.

Henry was not long absent. Soon the door opened and he came out, followed to the threshold by an old woman volubly obsequious. She stepped to the bit of untidy garden and stood to watch the vicar and his companion until they had passed out of sight.

"We're homeward bound now, I suppose," said Bennington.

"Yes. But not by the out-coming route. We'll make something of a detour and keep to the roads as much as possible; the bog is heavy travelling."

They went on a few yards again, then Bennington began.

"I'm taking this opportunity to open a subject which, I gather from Miss Garland, is awaiting discussion—not, however, that I agree personally in the idea that there is anything to discuss. Miss Garland and I are engaged to be married."

The thing that struck Henry instantly was the man's courage, or so he generously called it. In his blur of sensations the effrontery thinly veiled in the candour of audacity rather dazed his perceptions.

"Yes," he agreed. "Miss Garland told me so much, of course, when I myself proposed to her."

The other laughed a little. "And you didn't accept that statement of fact as final?"

"No—I found it impossible."

"May I ask why?"

"Well, to be frank with you, because I gleaned the admission from Miss Garland that she had had a certain awakening—not, I understand, a change in feeling towards yourself, so much as a new experience with regard to herself."

They went a short distance in silence. Henry had the feeling that his companion was his senior by any number of decades, whereas three or four years was certainly the limit of difference; there was the touch of matured pomposity that age *may* acquire, but youth can only simulate—yet Bennington's was not a simulation.

"Ah," said the latter, at last, "she has honoured you, I presume, with a higher order of affection than she accorded me. But that's hardly germane to the actual question. We'd better put it by as Miss Garland's private affair. As men, we look at the position rather differently. Take her points. First, she's rich——"

"I'd rather not, please," interposed Henry.

"H'm! What will you do, then?"

"I do not care to discuss Miss Garland at all."

"But we shall get nowhere if we do not."

"I hardly see, I confess, that you and I are likely to get anywhere—the discussion must necessarily lie between the lady and yourself."

"Dear me—no! That's a bit obsolete—surely! She's between two stools, you see. What we have to do is to see she doesn't come to the ground."

"I have an idea that if given her choice, she might not regard that entirely as a misfortune."

"You mean, of course, she'd prefer to remain single rather than marry me."

"As you put it plainly—I agree."

"Yes—well, a man in my position must expect hard knocks."

"If he courts them, naturally." There was a touch of brusqueness in Henry's manner.

"We'd better discuss my position, next——"

"Pray do not. There can be no need."

"On the contrary, there is every need; it is the pivot of the situation, as far as I am personally concerned. I am a ticket-of-leave man."

"Pray leave the subject," interrupted Henry with increasing irritation. It was a most odious breach of taste, in his opinion, and rasped him accordingly.

"Nonsense—no necessity to blink facts——"

"There is every necessity, every canon of decency demands it—I am practically a stranger to you."

"Exactly, but on your side you are not a stranger to the facts of my present standing."

"It is not relevant to the matter in hand."

"Pardon me—but I have to insist that it is. Allow me to lay my case before you—a ticket-of-leave man, penniless, of good social standing as far as my family is concerned, engaged to be married to the rich Miss Garland, mistress of Brux House in her own right and an estate that brings in a comfortable number of thousands a year. What am I to do?—'I cannot dig, to beg I am ashamed.'" And he laughed. "You want me to give her up."

"She herself desires it, too."

"Precisely—that goes without saying. But can I?"

The dull smart in Henry's heart and brain suddenly

ran to fire, and there was new meaning in the way he said, "It appears you cannot."

"Then there is no more to be said."

"On the contrary, as you have raised the discussion, we are only at the beginning."

"Oh, well, make your move then."

"A woman's happiness must surely deserve more weighty consideration than the flimsy matter as to how her purse affects a man's well-being."

"A woman's happiness!—I'm afraid you are encroaching upon a rather abstruse question. What is it, after all? In what does it consist?"

"It would vary with the woman, of course."

"Hardly, my dear sir—hardly. Within very slightly modified limits a woman's outlook can be gauged."

"I can't pretend to worldly wisdom on so intricate a matter, so perhaps we had better circumscribe the situation particularly to Miss Garland—to *her* happiness."

"Well—then?"

"It lies in your hands—to make or to mar?"

"H'm—I suppose you do not credit me off-hand with brutal intentions——"

"Certainly not—we need not descend to squalor."

"For instance, the squandering of her money—I have no intention of painting myself red for the world to stare at. I want a comfortable life after my late experience—as you may imagine."

Henry stared at the evening star through the little silence that followed.

"I am not really an ogre," pursued the other, "because a fastidious public conscience dubbed me a felon, for—well, never mind, its virtues and my vices

are not divided by such a gulf as is commonly supposed. But what I would point out is that a man is not cleansed of every virtue even in a prison cell, though it's a pretty bad school, and though he may be laughed at if he uses the word 'honour'—yet it is illogical. His breach of the law may wear another colour to unprejudiced eyes—therefore, without more ado, I claim to be as capable of caring tenderly for the woman who is my wife, as any other man."

Henry still gazed at the evening star. The forces at work within him were sufficiently subtle to demand his most strenuous attention—he was listening to his own arguments, not the other's sudden subsidence to the mawkish. They came to a turning of the ways and he halted.

Bennington's surprise was genuine when Henry said abruptly, "The thing is narrowed simply to this, 'Will you give Miss Garland to me?'"

Bennington shook himself, so to speak, as a terrier who has had a cold douche. The other's manner was electric, and he hung back from instant reply, to collect his thoughts a little. But Henry awaited an answer with the tense single-mindedness of the wholly sincere.

"I repeat it," he said, as Bennington remained mute.

"No, no, certainly not—I thought you grasped *that*, at least. We're trying, you know, each to justify his own position—isn't that it?"

"No, it is not."

"H'm."

"Can you marry a woman knowing that your single claim upon her is a word given a long time ago——"

"But shouldn't pledges, like wine, strengthen with age?" laughed Bennington.

Henry continued as if he had not heard the interruption, "Given under circumstances that no longer exist—her own whole-heartedness. Can you bind her to life-long slavery to a girl's word—with honour?"

"H'm!" murmured the other again. "I know no one will at present allow me the privileges of an honourable man, why should I simulate the virtues of one?"

They turned at right angles—it was not the way home, but Bennington being a stranger, did not know; and walked two hundred yards in silence. Then Henry halted again.

"Look at it from a lower level, that of humanity. Can you chain a fellow-creature to your side for life with the flimsy shackle of a dead bond, galvanized to a semblance of life by your personal selfish material needs?"

"Yes, I think the stuffing is good enough."

"Take but the view of common humanity."

"I don't pretend to do otherwise. We vary the objects of compassion, that is all."

On they went again. The nipping air swam about them silently, but in the distance, among the hollows and crannies of the hills, its eerie melodies floated thin and haunting. Half a moon swam over the eastern ridge and gilded the rolling country with weird radiance; homesteads stood as gem incrustations on the wide embroidery of field and bog.

The surge of emotion was rendering Henry dizzy. He was possessed of the sense that his fight was useless because he had no weapons; dimly he reached out for the sorriest stick to beat this dog.

"After all, you know," Bennington began again at length, "are we not—you and I—really after the

same end?—personal gratification, only the form of the gratification differs."

Henry strode on. There was a sting there, and he was sore, and he wouldn't wince in face of his enemy. With sickening dismay he seemed to recognise that the last word had been said, and swiftly he was possessed of cold terrifying fears, fears for the safety of the man at his side. He came to a standstill, lifted his arm and pointed, "There is your nearest way home, straight, take field and fence as they come —I know the country, there are no pitfalls," and swung round instantly, pushing on with immense strides. Bennington burst into a ringing laugh, too surprised to follow, and the laugh reverberated uncannily among the surrounding hills.

Henry toiled on unwearingly. When one's enemy uncovers one's wound and grins at it, the smart is keener than the original thrust. It was "personal gratification," only the form of the gratification differed. It led him by devious paths of thought to a saner grasp of Sarah's own refined philosophy—"the love will remain," she said. "That in itself *must* be joy, sorrow can only come from lesser causes, never from the big cause of our love." On and ever on he went, penetrating wildest, most unfrequented nooks and desolate places, with the moon's quiet eye as sole lamp, and the crushing of ice under his foot the only sound breaking the near stillness, for afar there was ever the trickle of wind-music in the air.

So it was defeat. From each point of the compass the fatal word ran to his ear, as if indeed the forces of insentient nature thrilled the two syllables along the four winds. In these blind moments of despair, he scorned himself with an infinite bitterness that he

had no weapon with which to meet his adversary; he could only plead as a child might do—"Give me what I desire." The other man's commonplace rhyme and reason loomed in his mind as the outcome of great powers that had crushed his puny self. Wherefore had *he* no vigour to wrest to himself that which was vital—aye, more vital than life itself; wherefore was it that the other was Goliath while he had not even a stone and a sling with which to hit him in the forehead?

What was primitive man? he found himself asking. And was it Bennington or himself who most resembled that antedated species? There was an ugly qualm as he half recognized in himself the big natural urgency which one might suppose would rule "primitive" personalities, rather than the studied fore-thought concerning mere material well-being. It was defeat all round.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AT dinner-time Henry had not arrived at the Vicarage, so Mrs. Vaughan counselled that they should not wait; most likely he had been captured on his way home and carried off to some distant dwelling; they all knew that he would never refuse whatever a parishioner asked of him.

Enid was restless, and dinner was rather a dull meal, the girl's atmosphere seeming to infect her companions at table; she was inattentive to all conversation and ate little. After dinner she wandered about the drawing-room, heedless of her mother's repeated suggestions that she should occupy herself more usefully.

She was telling herself over and over again that everything was being settled between Henry and Sarah—after all her prayers and hopes! Henry was at Cae'rmynydd without doubt; she even harboured a half suspicion that Fenton Underwood was not quite so innocent as he tried to appear, and knew where his friend lingered. Since the morning when she had seen Henry and Sarah together, their faces telling the tale—Sarah's troubled, Henry's radiant, she had not been able to comfort herself any more, the thing she

had dreaded had come to pass; Henry had been too strong for Sarah's old lover, and won her at last against all odds.

When bed-time came Fenton persuaded Mrs. Vaughan to retire as usual and he would sit up for Henry. Enid was not sorry; she was longing for the freedom of solitude.

In her room she crouched over the dying fire on the hearth, covering her face with her hands, but listening for every sound. Her brain was on fire; the end had come; and she was destitute of fortitude. After a while she got up and paced the room. She shivered with cold, and dragged a blanket from the bed, huddling it about her shoulders—then paced again. It was the shame that she could not bear—to be a slighted woman, her love flung back into her face! The smart deepened until she was beside herself. If Henry had only remained unmarried, she believed she could have been content, but now—Rages woke in her, and she clenched her hands, and wept with the degrading sense of impotence. He was gone for ever—the old Henry. She knew *he* would never return; when she saw him again he would be practically Sarah Garland's husband.

She heard the clock in the hall strike twelve. Had Henry come home, she wondered, and continued her restless walk. She told herself she was going mad that it was beyond her power to endure this terrible sorrow.

The clock struck again—the solitary hour of one, and a moment after came the sound of an approaching footstep on the landing outside her room. Alert instantly, she recognized the step as Henry's. Wild impulse seized her, she dropped the blanket, sped to

the door, and opened it. He came towards her, candle in hand, staring ahead, his face flushed, his eyes shining. He started and halted at sight of her.

"Oh," she said, in low shaken tones, "how late you are! Where have you been?"

He sighed, looking at her a moment without answering. Then he noted her wild eyes and grief-stricken manner, and came closer. "Why are you not in bed, child?"

He seemed in a dream, and the kindly, protective manner stung her to fresh pains. Out of his great happiness he could afford to pity her, to be tender with her.

She still searched his face with her great eyes, reading in its suppressed excitement only the restraint of newly found joy. He took her cold hand. "Poor child! Poor child! Don't be sad, but brave," he said, in queer unfamiliar tones, and stooped and kissed her forehead. The words trickled into her heart as fire. That *he* should bid her not be sad, but brave! The wringing in her throat was choking her. She turned back into her room and closed the door, then flung herself face downwards on the bed.

Plygain is the name given to the early church service on Christmas morning. It begins at six o'clock, and is evidently a remnant of pre-Christian ceremonial, when one may suppose the wild hill tribes had their Brumalia even as the polished Roman citizens, when they met to do homage to the newly-born Sun-God, who, at midnight on December twenty-fourth, is ever born as the sign Virgo rises above the horizon. In these prosaic days the good

folk sing hymns and anthems in honour of the birth of Christ, ushering in the day with prayerful rejoicings, blissfully ignorant of the pagan survival they perpetuate.

Eben Lloyd hummed a tune as he moved about the firelit kitchen, at intervals breaking into full baritone melody. He was the leader of the church choir, and rehearsed his part in the Christmas anthem. Through the uncurtained window the stars could be seen in a steel clear sky, but Eben knew not which was Virgo, in her pale vestures, the ever Immaculate maid, who had given birth once more to her ever-resplendent Son. It was half-past four, and when the kettle, swinging from the crane, spurtled hot drops upon the glowing peats, Eben made himself a cup of tea, and sat in the nook of the settle to drink it, and partake of oatcake and butter, finishing with a slice from the "spotted loaf"—sweetened bread with currants in it.

Breakfast finished, he proceeded with his toilet, and he was standing before the fire buttoning his collar, singing once more, when he paused suddenly to listen—he half fancied he heard a sound without, as if the gate had been opened and then fallen to again. It must have been fancy, however, because none was astir so early, save to go to *Plygain*. He struck into singing again, and reached his necktie from a nail on a beam overhead.

Just then there came a knocking on the door, and he stood in startled amaze until it was repeated, ere he crossed the floor, and disappeared into the little passage to answer the summons. Who could be abroad at five o'clock on Christmas morning save those who were on their way to *Plygain?*

Enid Mary stood without in the clear starlight, and his bewilderment at sight of her tied his tongue, so that he only stared, and did not invite her to enter.

"May I come in, Eben, please?" she asked.

He stepped aside that she might pass him, but remained mute; and then followed her to the firelit interior, his countenance absorbed in wonderment. She turned and faced him, and he was startled at her appearance—her cheeks were haggard, her eyes shining as it seemed out of great hollows; the lips were tremulous, and pitiful in expression. She held out her hands.

"Eben, will you take me for your wife?"

He was dumbfounded, and only stared mutely at her.

"Take me, Eben. You love me—and I cannot live without love." She went closer to him, and laid her hands upon his arms, looking into his face. "I know that you love me," she went on. "I have not been blind for a long time now, and I don't deserve your love—but you are the only man who has ever loved me—and I shall always love *you*—for that."

If it had been Eben's lot to live a thousand years he would never have forgotten his surroundings during those moments—the red glowing peats, the rich soft lights about the apartment, and the atmosphere faintly aromatic with the peculiar and distinctive smell of the candle flame fanning hither and thither in the draughts on the dresser. To his sensations he could give no name, nor even recall them. He stared and wondered, until slowly a smile broke over his face.

And at sight of his smile she suddenly flagged, tears sprang to her eyes, and she covered her face with her hands. Her part was over.

He stepped nearer charily, and touched her as a child puts cautious hands upon a long-coveted treasure, unable quite to separate the moment's reality from the past of mere imagining. In a little while, when her sobs were subsiding, he drew her to the settle, and then dared to take her hands from her face, and look down into her eyes. She divined that it was all unreal to him, that the event, which her endless night of watching had led up to in a certain sequence, now cut too sharply into the unbroken routine of his habit of thought for complete acceptance to be possible at once.

"Are you not glad?" she asked after a time, in a half protesting way.

And in answer he threw back his head and laughed the merriest of peals.

"Does that mean you are glad?" she said.

Then he became quite grave. "I am a man in a dream," he replied.

"Can't you wake up to the truth?"

"Not quickly," he said, and then bent his head so near her cheek that she knew what he craved, and gave him her lips.

Crimson flooded his face when the kiss was over, and he sat back a little as if in deference to her sweet condescension.

She smiled into his eyes. "Are you still dreaming?"

"Yes. Perhaps I shall dream for ever now, and the old *real* time will never come back."

"Why should it be real without me, and only a dream now I am here?"

He shook his head, and stole her hand and buried its soft delicacy in his big hardened palms. He

looked down. "It is too rough a casket," he said. And she smiled.

"Strong, not rough," she returned.

But he looked into the fire, and she felt his sheltering fingers grow tremulous.

Sitting near the window in the middle of the afternoon, Sarah espied a certain figure descending a sloping link of the road half a mile away. Henry Ackworth entered the room ten minutes later.

She rose, and stood awaiting his approach from the door.

"You are alone?" he asked.

"Yes—Mr. Bennington and Jim have gone for a walk. I preferred to stay behind. I expected you." She dropped back into her seat, a little paler, slightly tremulous. He stood beside the chair, and stared an instant to the softly moulded landscape ere dropping his gaze to meet her upturned eyes.

"Well—it is over."

"Did—you surrender?"

"No, I was beaten—royally vanquished."

"Your weapons were not his."

"I hadn't a weapon—all the strength was on his side."

She shook her head. "He was too small a quarry for you. You couldn't put out *your* strength against his."

"Either his armour had no joints, or I was too blundering a swordsman to find them."

She said nothing.

"Dearest, I am not worthy of the prize I tried to claim, or I should have found the magic to win you."

Tears gathered in her eyes. There was a long silence.

"And so it is 'good-bye,'" he said at last.

She lifted her hands and he took them. "But not 'good-bye,'" she said, and smiled through her tears. "Love has no farewells," and laid her cheek for a moment upon his clasping fingers.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BEFORE the New Year set in Eben Lloyd was off to the mines, his mother's objections no longer having weight with him; and, indeed, she was too amazed and elated by the news he whispered in her ear to offer protest further. He must needs get money with all speed now, and make for himself a place in the world that would not shame his future bride. The old woman's eyes glittered with pride. "Ah, boy, I could have told thee to lighten thy heart long ago!" she said.

Evan Pugh went up to Cae'rmynydd with a New Year's offering of a jug of cream and six eggs.

"Happy New Year to you, ma'am, and Miss Garland as well," he said to Eliza, who mumbled a reply in her customary ungracious way.

When she returned with the empty jug he had his shoulder against the doorpost ready for a gossip. "Indeed, ma'am, we're all in a reg'lar puzzle so's we can't make nothing out of it all. Here's the tale going about as Miss Garland's to be married to a gentleman as nobody heard nothing about till a week or two back, an' I says to 'em, 'What about the Vicar?' Then there's that mother o' Eben Lloyd with the story as her boy's to marry Miss Vaughan.

'Stuff an' nonsense!' I says to 'em as told me, 'there's his lordship Underwood here acourtin' her this minute, an' mos' likely a weddin' in the spring.'"

Eliza merely grunted, but Evan never took taciturnity as a form of rebuff.

"Why, them as seen the Vicar an' Miss Garland can't never believe as they'd marry anybody else—neither of 'em—his eyes coming off his book such a many times to look at her in church, and she looking on the floor, the right way for a lady, o' course, as wouldn't have none o' the brazen ways o' these country women—they ain't got no manners, poor things."

But nothing in the way of enlightenment was to be obtained from Eliza, and shortly after fresh cause of amazement leaked out—the Vicar was leaving Blaenafon in the spring.

Pugh, in his character of churchwarden, put on his best clothes immediately upon receiving the news, and presented himself forthwith at the Vicarage in search of verification of the report.

On reaching home again an hour later, he unfolded to his wife a little of his philosophy of the situation.

"The Vicar," said he, "looks like a man as wants to drownd hisself, an' he's givin' up bein' a parson for ever. His lordship Underwood's goin' to take him to his place, to keep him out o' harm's way, there ain't no mistake about it. Gr—r—r—r! Ye're a bad lot, you women, from the biggest lady in the land down to a poor creature like you! There's that Miss Garland as ye'd think wouldn't hurt a worm, so soft in her language as she is, an' she's just been playing the Vicar for a fool to fill her time up while this other man was away. I got it in my head as I should

get five shillings for my trouble, mos' likely, if I was to tell this new man, an' then he'd never marry her, an' she'd get no husband at all. Gr—r—r—r! Fetch my old breeches to me, ye bitch of a woman!"

A week later Pugh went in haste to the Vicarage once more, in too much hurry, in fact, to change his clothes for the visit. He burst into the kitchen and bade the maid fetch her master, the Vicar, instantly. And when Henry arrived he broke out, "Indeed, sir, will you come this minute? There's a hofful thing happened in the south—in the mines—postman John, he's brought the news in telegrams ahorseback to Bryngwyn, to Plas Ddu——"

"But what?" interposed Henry.

"Explosion, sir—a hundred men in the mine, and four of 'em out o' this parish—Eben Lloyd——"

Enid went up to Bryngwyn immediately, and oddly enough it was Fenton Underwood who accompanied her. Henry set out to visit the other stricken households. And early the next morning the carrier's van lumbered along the uneven ways, and picked up half-a-dozen tearful passengers at various points of the parish, and then continued its slow progress to the railway station eight miles away. They were going to claim their dead and bring them home for burial.

Enid had quietly announced her intention of going also, and none attempted to gainsay her. She had been reserved and a good deal of a mystery to those about her since she had heard the truth with regard to Henry and Sarah. She now constituted herself the sole comforter of poor Mrs. Lloyd, and tried to cheer her with the hope that they might find Eben alive. But the old woman rocked herself to and fro

in wildest grief, moaning endlessly, "I had never any will for him to go. I had never any will for him to go."

They returned three days later. There were four carts at the station to meet them in addition to the carrier's van and the Vicarage vehicle; in each cart they placed a coffin. The men walked at the horses' heads through the dreary miles. It was characteristic mountain weather—bleak winds flapping over a soddened landscape, and intermittent flurries of snow, the flakes lightly dropping on the coffins, and lingering longer there than on the men's coats, or in the horses' manes.

Arrived at last at Bryngwyn the poor distraught mother clamoured with wild piteousness for the coffin-lid to be removed, that she might see once more the beloved features of her only son. Enid stood by in dumb, dry-eyed misery as a neighbour at length acceded to the sad request, and removed the screws from the lid. Fenton Underwood was in the shadow on the far side of the room, waiting to accompany Enid home. Again Henry had gone to give what aid and consolation he could to the other stricken families.

Mrs. Lloyd hung over the coffin in a stupor for several moments, then broke into pitiful lamentations. Enid moved to her side, and also gazed down upon the poor blackened disfigured face, and began to weep bitterly, trying to comfort the old woman as best she could.

Fenton went over to her at last and took her arm.

"Come with me," he said, gently, tenderly, "indeed you must," and led her away and from the house, half supporting her as she sobbed hysterically.

It was early evening now, and the bleak winds

still sang shrilly over the wild moorland wastes. A star showed here and there among the wreckage of cloud. Fenton led Enid half a field's distance from the house and then halted. He slipped his arm more securely round her, and said softly, "Won't you be comforted?"

After a while she said, brokenly, as the sobs grew less violent, "You don't understand—I had a real affection for him—and it is such a cruel end—and he was so happy—he loved me—and he was the only man in all the world who ever loved me."

Fenton said nothing and did not move, and she struggled to calm herself. After a time he said slowly, deliberately, "I wonder if I could make you believe that poor Eben was not the *only* man who loved you."

She shook her head in a wandering way. "His love was so true—I had grown to be content with it——"

"Poor, brave Eben!" he said in kindly way. "Enid, dear, never think I look lightly on his great gift to you—it *was* splendid, dear, and it will always be a comfort to you to know how happy his last days were—through you. But don't turn me away again, don't send me home without my answer once more."

She shivered, and when he drew her closer into his arms, she made no resistance, only stared away to the dim expanse of grey bog dotted with feeding sheep.

"I may not be *quite* what you would choose in a lover, dear. I'm just a plain man with nothing heroic about me, but all the love my commonplace nature can hold is expended on you, and just to care for you always, and make you happy—well, the thought of

it almost makes me heroic enough to carry you off in my arms to prove myself."

He waited as it seemed a long time ere she spoke.

"You are very, very good, I know," she murmured.

"Make me very, very happy, dear."

She sighed, and he waited again.

"Dare you trust me?" she said at last.

He laughed gently, close to her cheek. "Give me your lips, darling, in answer."

But she still stared away to the nibbling sheep, and the clouds broke suddenly over head and laid a great blue continent of sky bare, studded with golden islets of stars. The faint radiance lit up her face, and he saw her eyes, misty with thought. He kept silence until she sighed and looked up to his face.

"I'm a little afraid," she said, meditatively, "afraid that the risk is too great—for you. I shouldn't give you enough in return——"

"Be my sweet debtor, dearest. I ask no more."

"But if I never paid—properly?"

Again he laughed in low tones. "Then be my debtor always. I'll swear never to tender the account."

"But—I should like to pay."

"Then to begin with, shall we take the will for the deed? And who knows but the years may show my ledger with nothing left on the debit side?"

"You are so *good*," she said after another pause, with a touch of rising excitement, "I wouldn't wrong you—do you believe I wouldn't wrong you?"

"Entirely, dear."

When she resumed, her tones were hushed, "Eben's love was like a sermon to me—teaching me what a man means when he loves a woman, and it has made

me afraid. It taught me the truth about Henry and Sarah Garland—it's a bit of the foundation of the world——"

He saw fresh tears gather in her eyes. "But, oh, a man can never know how sweet it is to a woman to be loved!"

"He knows his own joy, dear."

She looked up, blinking the tears away, and stifling the easily stirred sobs.

"Give me your lips, dear," he pleaded.

And tremulously, she obeyed.



EPILOGUE.

HENRY ACKWORTH entered his study and sat down. Hearing a sound at the door he glanced over his shoulder to see his housekeeper on the threshold, her unspoken request in her smiling countenance.

"Nothing before dinner, thank you, Mrs. Robinson."

"Not a cup of tea, sir, after your journey—and a toasted scone?"

He smiled his thanks. "Nothing, thank you."

"Lady Underwood called, sir, to enquire what time you were expected."

"Did she leave any message?"

"None, sir."

Mrs. Robinson went away, closing the door behind her. Henry settled himself rather wearily in his chair. Most probably Enid had called to ask him to dinner; Fenton wanted to talk, no doubt. But unless he heard from them again, he should not go across to the Manor until to-morrow; he preferred a quiet evening.

He sat near the fire, for the late autumn afternoon was chill; and gazed towards the window and caught glimpses of the Manor chimneys through the trees.

A good many years had passed since he gave up his pastorate on the Welsh hills and came to the Priory, since Sarah Garland had married John Bennington, and Enid and Fenton also married. The hair on his temples was silvered now. He had worked hard, people said too hard; but he had learned that a rather worn-looking physical equipment does not necessarily indicate exhaustion of nervous force or failure of spiritual vigour; for himself, he had often been conscious at his lowest physical ebb of an ever greater welling upward from that seemingly inexhaustible spring of spiritual vitality. There had been Fenton's village to reconstitute—the two friends had worked shoulder to shoulder; then there was the work in slum London. He had not accepted a pastorate again, being oppressed with a fear of bonds of any sort—he adjusted himself too readily and became their slave; in freedom he found ever new channels for energies of a peculiarly distinctive sort. Unemotional Fenton Underwood, with his acute discriminative powers, had appraised his friend with nice exactitude. Men followed Henry Ackworth as sheep the shepherd, he had the magic that attracted every sort among his fellows, and how many scores of times had there come the quick smart of tears under his eyelids at the mute offerings of affection from outcasts. Neither by skill nor will of his own, he declared, did he ever reach that solitary, untrimmed, blinking light of love in these darkened souls, but simply by some gracious gift of inheritance—was it the subtle touch of the idealist, after all, stiffened with maturer strengths?

At first, perhaps, he *had* worked with an excess



of zeal, to dull the insistent aching of a certain deep-rooted pain, touched for years, too, with infinite chagrin. For he had found it hardest of all to reach that level of quietude where he did not scorn himself for an impotence that had hindered his winning Sarah Garland. It had come to a matter of who was the better man—he or the social derelict, Bennington, and Bennington had carried off the honours. He *lived* up to peace by slow degrees, and at last caught Sarah's meaning when she said, "He was too small a quarry for you—you couldn't put out *your* strength against his." He acquired knowledge of that strength by painful evolution, while she—ah, it was very subtle joy to recognise it—she had known intuitively his larger self, even while he himself paltered and suffered with the smaller.

He had only seen her a few times through all the years, for his life did not often lead him into the sphere where she moved; they had touched hands and spoken twice, that was all. But he heard about her. Fenton Underwood gave him news, and when they sat together sometimes in the quiet privacy of Henry's study at the Priory, Fenton occasionally talked of her and her manner of life.

"She's letting him have his money's worth—eh? She denies him nothing—a sort of a spoilt child of a husband; he has his hunters and pack, you know, and there's the town house, and every gaiety; and she, well, she always brings back to me the flavour of the hills of Blaenafon, that indescribable quietude, and *so much* presence. It may be a fancy, but I seem to catch in this attitude of lavish generosity where her husband's pleasures are concerned the very kernel

of her contempt—she pours into his greedy hands——You catch my meaning?"

"No children—thank God!" and Fenton shrugged his shoulders.

The Manor chimneys were aflame with sunset light, and Henry's eyes had scarce roved from them during the hour that had gone since he entered his study. His thoughts had slipped to retrospect, as a flood, long dammed, at last released. He had been absent from the Priory for a month, engaged in arduous work that did not permit of indulgence in private dreaming, and during the whole of that time there had been the urgent inner need to step aside from active labours, and rest apart in the luxury of thought.

Reading a newspaper as he journeyed up to town on that particular day a month ago, his eye had caught the heading—"Serious Accident in the Hunting Field." The paragraph below detailed the occurrence —"Mr. John Bennington, of Brux House, Red Barn End, was thrown from his horse whilst hunting and sustained such severe injuries that he died within two hours."

It was inevitable that the news should come to him in the nature of a shock. Though Sarah Garland was divided from him by all the worlds, yet every vital happening to her must also touch him closely. With what magic potency had her love worked in his life, become, indeed, the central pivot of his existence —all things related to it, all things converged towards its beating heart. It was so entirely the whole of life to him that he had long ceased to rebel against the pains of separation—the dividing line existed only on the physical level of existence, spiritually they were



wedded, and he knew now the meaning of her parting words—"Love has no farewells."

Thought had slipped into a pleasant groove; all his old memories of her ran softly as music through his mind; and, sweet as recollections of her always were, there was now a touch as of fuller space, greater freedom—how gossamer a barrier can be and yet how subtly effective! He couldn't repress that sense of liberty.

In his absorption in his dreams the sound of the door opening came as a little shock, and he turned with a start. It was Enid's boy—young Fenton.

"Good-evening, Uncle Henry."

"How do you do, Fenton?"

"If you please, Uncle Henry, I've brought a lady to see you; and mother says I'm not to stay one single little minute, because she's waiting for me at the gate, and we're going into the village and back before dark."

He made his little bow and introduced the lady in the doorway, then slipped past her and away after the fashion of a young colt that instant seized with the unconquerable need of violent exercise.

"Mrs. Bennington—Mr. Ackworth." The child's voice left a silence behind it that his retreating footsteps merely accentuated.

He in the room and she in the doorway stood unmoving for a long moment, then they advanced towards each other and met in the middle of the floor. She was smiling. But the whole thing was too bewildering, too momentous for him to make any sign. She gave him her hand.

"I came three days ago," she said, "as Enid so

kindly invited me." She searched his face with smiling eyes. "And I am to ask you to go back with me to dinner at the Manor House."

He was still bewildered as he led her to a seat, and then stood looking down upon her. The years had passed lightly over her, leaving scarce a touch in face or figure to tell how many had slipped by since last he had talked familiarly with her. It struck him sharply, joyously.

"How unchanged you are!"

She smiled again. "But we are getting old, nevertheless."

He reflected a moment. "Yes, I have accepted it for myself."

He tried to shake himself into some perception of the moment's situation—after the dazing effect of her advent came the stranger result of her actual presence. It was as if he were trying to compass her abounding possession of his being within the small measure of a daily need.

He laughed a little at last. "I'm so taken back," he explained. "It can't be actual fact that *you* are there."

She put her hands on his arms and drew him down to her side. "Yes, my dear, I am here. You are here."

They stepped into the soft darkness of the early evening and walked hand in hand down the avenue, under the half-stripped trees. They had talked for an hour within doors, but were silent now. Midway along the lane that led to the Manor House he drew her hand within his arm.



"Do you remember saying that love had no farewells?"

"Yes—and we have found it true."

"So that we have really been away from each other as labourers who go forth to their work until the evening—then they return."

"Yes, dear, we have returned, and to-morrow——"

"We go forth together—is it not so?"

They halted, trying to see each other's faces in the dimness. Then he laid his cheek upon hers.

Evan Pugh stood in the gateless opening to the farmyard, his hands in his pockets, his gaze fixed on the activity of his wife who was cleaning out the cow-house, tossing the manure to the heap with muscular dexterity. Evan's hat was drawn low upon his forehead to shade his eyes from the dazzling April sunlight. Fowls pecked about his feet, a couple had used their wings and alighted on the thatch, and now assiduously plied beak and claws on the patches of green lichens embroidering the browns and golds of the weather-stained rushes. The dog nosed idly here and there, ever alert for that complementary nourishment he was always conscious of lacking; the cat was blinking on the hayrick; crows, in the touchy mood of nesting time, cawed with querulous intonation; the far hills were mapped with cloud-islets and continents, and the sombre moorland had become mellow under the magic of sunlight.

"Look you, woman, get your work done faster. I might see the coach coming to Cae'rmynydd any minute, and you must milk a pint into a basin that very minute for me to take up to Mr. and Mrs. Ack-

worth for their tea after the journey. Great God! To wait fifteen years for a woman, and let another man have her first! And they're to be here for two months, so there'll be money for milk—and I shall charge 'em a bit dearer—tell 'em the prices are higher since they went away—with the women gone such a lot finer in their clothes nor they used to be—wearin' bonnets wi' feathers o' Sundays 'stead o' hats, an' mantles wi' beads on 'em 'stead o' the ole shawls——"

The woman grinned and her black eyes shone.

THE END.

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